

INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 15, 1970
INTERVIEWEE: JAMES U. CROSS
INTERVIEWER: ARTHUR J. MAYER
PLACE: Brigadier General Cross's office, Bergstrom Air Force Base, Austin, Texas

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M: General, I wonder if you'd just give us a run-down on yourself, your career, how things have gone, how you happen to be where you are right now.

C: Well, I guess I'd have to go back to about 1943 when I came into the United States Air Force, or at that time the United States Army Air Corps, from my boyhood home in Alabama. I was born and raised in Andalusia, Alabama. I was inducted, or about to be inducted, as a draftee in World War II and elected to go into the aviation cadet program. I was selected for that; went into the services; had my first assignment in Miami, Florida, for basic; went on through classification and pre-flight, to undergo pilot training in California; went through a good deal of primary and basic flight training in the state of California; ended up, graduating from pilot school here in Texas at a place called Marfa. Subsequently, I went on through transition training to become a transport pilot. As a matter of fact, I went through, as a second lieutenant, right here at Bergstrom Air Force Base.

M: That must have been when you met your wife then. I notice she's an Austin girl.

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C: Well, yes. As a matter of fact, it was. It was. I met my wife at that time. I was a youngster about 20, and she was a little girl about 16, and we were fortunate enough to get together and marry, and we're still very happily in that same state. [We] have four children now.

I then went on and flew the hump during World War II; came back and was discharged in El Paso, Texas; came to Austin to try to go to the University of Texas. But being an out-of-stater, I was not accepted for enrollment at the University and ended up going back to my home state where I went to school at Auburn. API, Alabama Polytechnic Institute; it's now Auburn University.

M: Right.

C: In 1948, I was recalled to the military service to fly on the Berlin Airlift. And at that time I hadn't really made up my mind that I was going to be a career officer; it was simply that they needed me. I came back and elected to stay for three years. About that time, the Korean War started, and that sort of trapped me, more or less into staying in the military service. At that point, I made the decision, "Well, I'm in; I might as well stay in. I've got six years of service behind me." And so, I stayed in the military service and have been stationed in a number of places throughout the world. I finally ended up in 1958 in the Washington, D.C. area as the chief pilot for the Special Missions Unit that's based there, that carries all the Presidents and Vice Presidents and staff and Cabinet members of the Executive Branch of the government, as well

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as certain high-ranking military folks. It was in this capacity that I first met Vice President Lyndon Johnson. He had been a customer of ours for some time, that is to say in his position as Majority Leader of the Senate.

M: This must have been about, when, '58?

C: No, this was after he became the Vice President. He had been a customer of the Special Missions organization up there from way back in the days, I suppose, when he'd first become the Majority Leader. Because, from time to time, when he was out on Armed Services Committee business, obviously it was in the interest of the government and the interest of the United States Air Force to carry the Senator wherever he needed to go. I had heard of the Senator because so many of our people had carried him around in our airplanes, but I had not met him until December 6, 1961. He called, or his office called, for one of our planes to take him from Washington to Chicago to his Ranch here in Texas, and I was selected to be the pilot for that particular trip as we had just gotten some new jets called the Lockheed C-140 Jetstar, built in Marietta, Georgia. We made the trip; it was successful, although we had some bad weather and some other problems. It was a comfortable and successful trip, and the Vice President commenting to me at that time, said "Major, that was a nice trip. Hope to see you again soon." I thanked him and went on back to Washington.

M: You didn't realize how prophetic that was.

C: I had no idea how prophetic that very statement would be later.

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I went on back about my business, back to Washington. And in January of 1962, as I recall, about the 3rd or 4th of January, we had another call to come back and get the Vice President and take him to the winter White House in Palm Beach, Florida, where he was to meet with President Kennedy and members of the President's Cabinet, as well as leaders of Congress, prior to the opening of Congress, which was scheduled sometime the 8th or 9th of January, as I recall. This was in '62.

And so I came here to Bergstrom, landed the airplane, and we were waiting for the Vice President to come. He radioed ahead; he was driving his own car, he was by himself that day. He radioed ahead and said--and I was a major at this time, by the way, a senior major, but nonetheless a major--he radioed ahead and said, "Major, how long is it going to take us to get to Florida?" I said, "Mr. Vice President, it's going to take two hours and twenty minutes." I'll never forget that comment that I made. He said, "Well, you've really got me in a tither." And I said, "How's that, Mr. Vice President?"--over his radio system. He said, "Well, I've got to be there by four o'clock. You've just got to make it." I said, "Sir, I don't think it humanly possible for us to make it, but you can bet that we'll do our best. We'll try." He said, "Well, that's all I can ask." In just a few minutes, the Vice President drove up on the ramp out here; jumped out of the car; let someone else worry about parking it; hopped aboard the airplane. And we proceeded, forthwith, to crank the engines, get out to the end of the runway, and get launched. And I might

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say, that we did that all in record time. And once we got airborne, we just left the throttles at full-throttle and headed for Florida--took every shortcut that we could. And we picked up about 28 minutes, altogether, over what we had planned.

M: So you did it in less than two hours?

C: Did it less than two hours. And I got there at five minutes 'til four, and he beat Mr. [Robert] McNamara in, which I believe was what his objective was! (Laughter). And therein began our association--mine with the Vice President, later the President. And I must say that it was a wonderful, exciting experience for me. Because the following day--the way I came to become permanently associated with the Vice President and the President--the following day, as we were getting ready to leave, the Vice President was standing at the nose of Air Force One, which was parked in the general area of where our plane was parked, and he summoned me with a arm motion to come over and join him, and I did. And Mr. McNamara, my big boss, was standing there. I did not know Mr. McNamara. And the Vice President said, "Bob, this is the fellow I was talking to you about last night. This is the fellow I want for my pilot." That was the first I knew that there had been any conversation about me. And I just was flabbergasted, you might say, because I had been selected for quite an honor, at least, for a country boy from Alabama.

M: Of course, you had a country boy from Texas there to deal with, too.

C: Well, that's what he's been called, but he's one of the most

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sophisticated men I've ever known to have been labelled with that.

M: I think a lot of people are deceived by where people come from and how they talk, instead of what they're like.

C: Possibly. Possibly. I certainly feel that way about him. But in any event, within just a few days the word came through official channels, all the way down to my squadron where I was assigned, that, sure enough, I had been selected to be the permanent pilot for the Vice-President. And as the years rolled on, and as the Vice President's job grew and he grew in stature with the people, he placed more and more responsibility on me as a helper. In other words, if the Vice President said, "Cross, I want you to go do something for me," I'd say "Yes, sir." I didn't have to be just a pilot, so I'd help him in any way that I could.

M: Were you his military aide, too?

C: No, there was a fellow named Howard Burris that was his military aide and intelligence--briefer, special assistant for military matters at the time. Howard is a Texan; was a good friend of mine; he's living in Washington now.

M: Is he still in the service?

C: No, he retired in 1964. About the time that President Johnson was ascending to the Presidency, Howard went to the White House and worked in the situation room with Mr. Bromley Smith -- I'm sure you've heard of him, or know him, or possibly have talked with him--

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M: Yes.

C: --- and some of the other folks that were there on the National Security Council. The President had a military aide that had stayed behind after President Kennedy's assassination. That was Major General Chester Clifton. And I don't think that Howard really wanted to be the President's military aide. I think that Howard was satisfied with what he was doing, which was special assistant, national security advisor, so to speak, and I think he had it in his mind all the time that he was going to retire, anyway, as quickly as he could. And it later proved out that he did, because he retired in 1964. He's doing quite well now; I understand he's a consultant in Washington and quite happy.

But in any event, after the President went on into the White House, I found myself from time to time still doing jobs and chores for him. He'd call me, or I'd receive word through one of his [aides].

M: Would he call you directly. . .

C: Oh, yes.

M: . . . or just have one of his. . .?

C: No, he'd call me. I corresponded with him rather frequently; and of course, I always figured that it was not incumbent upon me to call the President, because certainly, he was too busy to deal with a little guy like me. But if he ever needed me, he knew where I was; and I was always available, should he ever need me. And he did, from time to time, if he had certain things he wanted done. I guess he--over the years that I'd flown for him, over the years

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that I'd worked for him, even though it might have been in sort of a part-time status--I guess he'd decided that he could trust me. On certain things he wanted done, he'd just call me directly and say, "Cross, I'd like you to do so-and-so." "Yes, sir." And we . . .

M: Were you out at Andrews [A.F.B.] at this time?

C: I was out at Andrews at that time. In a way, it put me in a sort of tight spot at times, because here was the President of the United States calling me, a major--or possibly, I might have been a lieutenant colonel by this time. I can't recall all the dates and times.

M: Puts you in a bind with who you're working with a little bit, doesn't it?

C: Puts me in a bind with who I was working with, because, often times I would find myself receiving orders or instructions from the President of the United States, and I'd have to go back to my superiors, colonels and sometimes generals, and say that the President called me and suggested that he'd like this done or thus and so. I would sort of be on delicate footing at times. I had . . .

M: Did you have squadron duties in addition to flying?

C: No. I might retrogress just a little bit here. When the President ascended the Presidency, one of the first things that happened to me--and this came through official channels, I did not hear directly from the President himself--was that I should go over to

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the Presidential pilot's office and start qualifying in the big Air Force Number One. I had not flown that particular airplane. I had a good deal of experience in lots of others, but I had not flown that particular one. [I was told] I should go over there and be qualified in that, which I did. And so, while I didn't have any additional squadron duties as such, I was, in fact, deeply involved in retraining in the big 707. I had to go to Kansas City and go through TWA's captains' school out there that . . .

M: You hadn't flown the 707?

C: I had not flown the 707. We had very few people that had. You see, the Air Force only had four of those things, and we had very few people [who had].

M: So this is one of the first ones, and it's one of the oldest, then, of the 707s.

C: Well, we've only got four. Yes, it is. In fact, that airplane right there was delivered to us on October, 1962, for President Kennedy, and it's still in service right today with President Nixon. The boy that flies it is a good friend of mine, Ralph Albertazzie.

M: Albertazzie. Did you read the article in yesterday's Austin American?

C: No, I didn't see that.

M: I've got a copy. I'll leave it with you.

C: My wife's got a copy of it; she told me about it last night, but

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I simply haven't had time to read it. I thought I would sometime.

But to get back to my duties, the question you asked about my duties, I was involved in that. And it took me about a year, as I recall--no, it took me about five months--to become qualified. It took me about a year to sort of build up enough time that I could really be fully qualified to assume to role as Presidential Pilot, which I did after about a year's time, after he'd ascended to the Presidency.

M: Who was flying him up to this time?

C: President Kennedy's pilot, Colonel Jim Swindal, also happened to be an Alabama country boy. (Laughter). Jim and I flew together, then, for about a year, and then Jim got reassigned and went on to another assignment in Spain. He's now back in Nashville, Tennessee, as an advisor to the Tennessee National Guard, Air National Guard. In any event, I flew with Jim until around November, I guess, of '64. And then we began to alternate the flying of President Johnson. Of course, I was still flying the President's Jetstar all the time anyway.

M: He has two planes then?

C: He did have, yes.

M: I noticed that they were saying in the paper that he still has his Jetstar. The Jetstar is just a smaller, shorter plane, short-flight plane?

C: It's a little airplane that holds about twelve people, twelve passengers. It has four engines; it's fast, about the same speed

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as a 707. It doesn't have a great deal of range; about fifteen hundred nautical miles is about all we can get out of it. We used to use it for short trips around here in Texas. We used it like from Washington to Detroit when he had just an out-and-back without too many people involved. We used it a good deal. I suspect that the President flew on that Jetstar, during the course of his Presidency, fifty or sixty times. Maybe more.

M: I notice that when you talk about checking out in the 707, are there any features of the Air Force One that are different from most 707s?

C: Just a standard 707. Just like you see out here on American Airlines or TWA.

M: Do planes have a feel to them?

C: Yes.

M: Do you get used to flying one?

C: 707s all fly just alike. I could go fly today in a TWA 707, or that one there, or American Airlines, and they fly the same. However, if you went from a 707 to a DC-8, it would be a little different. And the surroundings that you're sitting in are a little different. They're not much, but enough different that it takes a bit of learning. The systems are somewhat different. That is, what this switch does and how that system functions all the way back to the engine, or so forth, are a little different. And the pilot, the captain, needs to know every single system on the airplane, and how it functions, and what would happen in case

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the electrical power quit, or the hydraulic system failed, and so on. So it's important that each new airplane that you go into that you get an extensive schooling on it, first, and then a good deal of sitting in it, simulating flying it as well as actually flying it, before you can consider yourself ready for a check flight by a licensed examiner that can certify you as a fully qualified captain.

M: Did you have to do the same thing with the Jetstar?

C: Oh, yes. But now . . .

M: But not as long?

C: In my case, you see, I was already flying the Jetstar.

M: I see.

C: See, I'd been flying it ever since I first met the President. In fact, it was the Jetstar that I was flying when I met the then-Vice President Johnson, December 6, 1961.

M: I see.

C: So that really is a thumbnail sketch, I should say, of how I came to know the President--just mere chance more than anything else--not the fact that my wife is from Austin, Texas, or from previous associations with this base. As a matter of fact, I was associated with Bergstrom Air Force Base here even before the war--not before the war, but before my involvement in World War II--in that my father was the construction superintendent that built this place in 1942.

M: Is that right? (Laughter).

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C: And I was a 17 year old youngster, and came here with my father, and being a strapping young man at 17, you know, with a stern father. . .

M: In those years, there was a real shortage of labor, too.

C: Yes. And with a stern father, he said, "Okay, boy, you're out of school. You're going to work." So I worked right here on this base as a water boy. It's quite different being the chief water boy and like I am now.

M: (Laughter) A lot simpler in the old days, wasn't it?

C: It was a lot simpler. Yes, it was. The responsibility of being the wing commander here, and the commander of all these resources we have here, people and so, it takes a little more time, and you have to anguish more about it.

M: Management is a real art in itself.

C: You have to anguish a good deal about whether or not you're doing the right thing for your people, especially with what they give you to operate here, and whether or not you're wasting any of your government's funds.

However, to get back to my association with the President. As our lives became more and more intertwined, as he grew in the Presidency, and as time passed while he was in the Presidency, I became qualified in the airplane. I was attending an officer's dining-in of my wing here at Andrews one evening. We were all dressed up in our best dress and everything.

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M: Best and everything.

C: You know, and everybody was standing around drinking a little glass of wine--very formal stiff talk--having a good time nevertheless. And my commander, a fellow named Colonel Hank Wilder, came up to me and said, "Cross, are you in trouble?" I said, "You better answer that, Colonel. I don't know if I'm in trouble or not. Why, have I done something wrong?" He said, "No, there's some guys in here from the OSI checking up on you, and they're in here right now. It's a real hurry-up deal." And I said, "Well, not that I know of."

M: Is that the Office of Special Investigation?

C: OSI. Office of Special Investigation, that's right. And I said, "Well, no, sir, I reckon everybody's got a skeleton or two in their closet, but I don't know of anything that's of serious enough nature to warrant these guys being in this room tonight checking on my personal qualifications or my character or anything like that." Well, he said, "They're sure asking questions about you tonight. And I've been told, as your commander, that I'm not to talk about it to you and that I'm to handle this thing with the utmost discretion." I said, "Well, just handle it discreetly, and I don't know what they're doing here unless it is something in connection with my association with the President;" but I had no idea what it was. As I recall, that was about the 9th of July. This was 1965.

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The following day about ten o'clock in the morning--I happened to be off the next day, because it was on a Saturday, as I recollect, I'm pretty sure it was a Saturday-- Jack Valenti called me. I'd known Jack for a long time. I'd met him back in the days when President Johnson was the Vice President. He says, "Jim, were you aware that the President was considering you to be the military aide?" And I said, "No, I was not." But then it became sort of clear to me that that's what those people had been doing there, the previous evening, asking about me. And I said, "No, I was not." He said, "Well, he's considering you, among two or three other fellows that he knows, to be the chief military aide." I said, "You mean to replace General Clifton?"

M: Of course, Clifton was an expert in information, wasn't he?

C: Public relations.

M: Public relations.

C: That's correct.

M: He ran it for the Army for awhile.

C: That's correct. That's exactly right.

M: Far cry from what you were doing.

C: Yes. In any event, Jack says, "That's right. Do you know anything about how to be an aide to a President?" I said, "I never thought about being an aide to a President. No, I don't know anything about it." He said, "Well, what's your idea of what an aide to a President does?" I said, "Well, I guess he organizes all the military ceremonies. I guess he probably briefs the President

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occasionally on intelligence situations that might occur. He is probably liaison man between the Chiefs of Staff and maybe the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs on other than policy matters. That's just a guess on my part, but I wouldn't think he'd ever be in on the councils with the President that would be talking about whether to make war, or whether to bomb or not to bomb certain targets. I would just guess that he would control all of the resources that have to do with the logistics of the Presidency."

And Jack says, "Well, that's about right. Don't tell anybody that I've talked to you. Least of all, don't tell the President."

M: He hates for people to get rid of his secrets before he gets a chance. This has come out in some other interviews, too.

C. That's right, that's right. I have an idea that the President had probably told Jack to call me and feel me out on this, and that was his way, Jack's way, of letting me know I should keep it real supersecret: "Don't even tell the President." I had known the President long enough to know that there were certain things that he liked about being the man to break the news to someone about what was going to happen, so I didn't tell a soul.

Jack's parting statement was, "You be sure now and be on that airplane when we go to Texas." We were going within just a day or so to Texas.

I said, "Oh, yes, I'm always on the plane. Whether you see me or

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not, I'm there." Because the President had already indicated to me a number of times, in a number of different ways, that I should always be with him. Because he had certain things that he wanted me to do; and I was the kind of fellow that always liked to please the boss, and if the boss said, "I want you to be here, but I don't want to see you," well, that's where I was. I was available right at his elbow, but around behind his thumb, so to speak. So I said, "Oh, I'll be there."

So we left a day or so later, and went on down to the Ranch and, as I recall, stayed maybe a couple of weeks at the Ranch. And I didn't hear anything further about my status as the designee, or soon-to-be designated as the new military aide. Until one morning, one of the sergeants who worked on the White House logistics staff--mail handler and classified mail clerk, fellow named Duffy, fine man, just a top notch fellow; I'll never forget him as long as I live--walked out to me and said, "Colonel"--I was a colonel at that time, lieutenant colonel--"Colonel, you got anything you want to tell anybody around here?" He had a kind of a grin on his face. And I said, "No, I don't have anything I want to tell anybody. What are you getting at?" He says, "Well, the boys are all speculating that you're going to be the new military aide." I said, "Well, I don't know anything about it." I was trying to keep the confidence that had been asked of me. And I said, "No, I don't know anything about it." And he said, "Here, let me show you something." And he took a piece of yellow

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message paper . . .

M: Foolscap?

C: Foolscap. And on it there was a news release that had already been released by the press secretary, ol' Bill Moyers.

M: And nobody said anything to you?

C: And it had that it was the President's intention to nominate Lieutenant Colonel James Cross to be the new military aide to the President. And of course, that pretty well cinched the fact that I was going to be the military aide.

I didn't feel like discussing it, simply because the President hadn't talked to me about it. When the President finally elected to talk to me about it was the time when I felt like I could discuss it. And I couldn't even tell my wife. Of course, she was in Washington, and I was at the Ranch.

The next thing I knew, I got a call from Lieutenant Colonel Mike Cook, who was the Air Force assistant to the then-military aide, Major General Clifton, and Mike says, "Say, Jim, I just talked to your wife, because she's going to get on the Jetstar in a little bit and come down here to Texas to join you." I said, "How's that?" He said, "Well, the President called me a while ago and told me to get your wife down here for the announcement." They were going to make the announcement the following day that I was to be the President's [military aide] and the pilot.

And sometime later, the President, in passing, drove by in his car or talked to me on the radio. I don't recall which. He

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said, "Cross, you know about your new job, don't you?" I said, "Yes, sir." And I thanked him for having so much confidence in me, that I could do such a job for him. And he said, "Well, you're going to get your wife down here, aren't you?" I said, "Sir, she's already on the way, thanks to you." He said, "Well, fine. We're going to take your picture tomorrow. Let you stand up and meet the press." I said, "Well, fine, Mr. President. I'll do the best job I can for you, and I hope that you won't be disappointed." So then, that was the basis on which I was put in to be the military aide to the President. It proved to be a most rewarding experience.

M: You were the senior aide then? You actually took over Clifton's place?

C: That's correct. I took General Clifton's place, and I had three fine lads that went to work for me. One of them was already there; he was a Marine; he's presently in Vietnam. He's a colonel now; he was a major at the time. But he was there working for General Clifton. He's a boy from Memphis, Tennessee. His name was Haywood Smith. He was one of the most unforgettable men that I believe I'll ever know in my whole life, just a top-notch fellow; I love him like a brother. But he worked for me throughout the entire time that I was the military aide to the President, which was July, '65, until the first of June, 1968. And then when I left up there, he was my nominee to the President to serve out the remaining term as armed forces aide to the President. We changed the title, by the way, from military aide, when I took the

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assignment, to armed forces aide. [This was] more in keeping with the merging of the services and the concepts of JCS employment of the military forces as we know them today. And he was my nominee to the President to be the [armed forces aide].

M: And then you had a Naval and an Army officer, too?

C: Right. Had a Naval officer. The fellow that I hired, initially, was a fine young man. He graduated as number three in his class from Annapolis in 1956. He was a real shiny young man named Worth Hobbs, a boy from North Carolina. And Worth stayed with me for just about two years, but then he elected to go back to civilian life, and he retired in the Washington area. He's living in Washington now and also doing quite well.

M: He must have resigned then?

C: He resigned. That's correct. He didn't retire; he was too young. And the other fellow that worked with me was Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Robinson. He's presently in Vietnam. He has a . . .

M: Engineer battalion.

C: . . . engineer battalion. Do you know him?

M: No, I don't know him. I just thought, probably, as a lieutenant colonel, that would be his . . .

C: He's an engineer officer. He comes from Washington, D.C.--a fine lad that really did a wonderful job for the President and for me. But those were my officers. I later replaced Worth Hobbs with a fellow by the name of Sam Latimer, a shiny young guy from the

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combat wars of Vietnam that we brought back from over there. He'd been flying over North Vietnam, and we brought him in as a Naval assistant, which is the title that we gave them. We gave them Army assistant, Navy assistant, Marine assistant. I didn't have an Air Force assistant. I had to be my own Air Force assistant.
(Laughter).

M: I've often wondered. When you see pictures of ceremonies at the White House, there's always a good number of young military officers around, particularly, when there are social functions. Where do they come from?

C: I interviewed every single one of those boys.
We get them from the Washington area there. They're all single men. We pick them up from all the services, and we screen their records very carefully to make sure that they've got the qualities that we want in social aides, and then we bring them in and interview them so as to ascertain whether or not they've really got the poise and dignity and the grace to be an extension of the President and Mrs. Johnson

M: This is a periodic thing for them, though. Are they on this full-time?

C: As long as they're in the Washington area, they're on it on a part-time basis. We call them from their regular jobs, you see. And if they're in the Washington area, we can summon them, so to speak. We had quite a stable of them. We had about--as I recall--

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twenty-five from each of the services that we could call upon.

M: That is a lot.

C: And we used them in social functions in the evening. We used them at the military ceremonies. We used them for receiving lines to guide the people and to introduce the people as they came through to the President.

M: Good experience for them, too.

C: Oh, yes.

M: They wouldn't get that opportunity very often.

C: These young guys are just champing at the bits to get those assignments, but one of the prerequisites . . . of course, you've got to be single. You've got to pass quite a rigorous examination by lots of people, the last of which was me. And they really had to be topnotch folks of the most sterling character to get those jobs. Of course, they still did their regular jobs. They continued to function in their regular jobs as pilot, or staff officer, or whatever position they happened to hold. And they did the White House work on a part-time basis when we summoned them.

M: Very good. I would guess then . . . had you ever flown President Kennedy in the Jetstar?

C: Never did. As a matter of fact, the only time that I ever met President Kennedy was on the occasion when we went to Palm

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Beach that I spoke about earlier. Either just when we arrived...I guess it was. Yes, I know it was. When we arrived just ahead of Mr. McNamara, President Kennedy drove up out there and got aboard the Jetstar, and Vice President Johnson introduced me to President Kennedy, and I shook hands with President Kennedy. It's the only time I ever saw him up close.

M: And you were in training for Air Force One, I guess, at the time that the assassination took place.

C: No, as a matter of fact . . . Let me tell you about that. We had been down to Texas. Well, in fact, we had been all over the United States on a trip with the Vice President. We'd stopped at several places: in Oregon, as I recall, and California, and Oklahoma, and back and forth across the country on some business that the President had sent Vice President Johnson on. And we had come in to the LBJ Ranch, landed about one o'clock in the morning.

M: Could you get the big ones in there, or was this the Jetstar?

C: No, just the Jetstar. Now, I have landed bigger planes there. Later on, after President Johnson became President, he had his Ranch[runway] lengthened; the runway was lengthened 1000 feet. And [he] had beefed up the pavement a little bit, and I took a Douglas DC-9 in there one night. We borrowed a DC-9 from the factory, and I flew it in there one night.

M: That's one of those three-engine jobs.

C: Two engines.

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M: Two engines?

C: Yes. The engines are mounted back on the tail. The three-engine is the Boeing 727.

M: Right.

C: The DC-9 is a little bit smaller and shorter. But getting back to the trip into the Ranch from Oregon, California, etc. We landed back out there about one o'clock in the morning, and the Vice President knew that we were quite tired, that our clothing was dirty, and that we probably needed to get home.

And so he said to me--and I'll never forget this either--he said, "Cross, you boys must be getting tired." And I said, "Well, yes, sir. We need to get home and get some clean clothes." He said, "Well, I'll tell you what: you go on back to Bergstrom [A.F.B.], spend the night, sleep late. And in the morning, when you get ready to get up, before you get ready to leave and go on back to Washington, call me. There's not any point in you staying around down here. Mrs. Johnson and I will be joining President Kennedy in San Antonio on Thursday." This was Tuesday night. I said, "We appreciate your consideration, Mr. Vice President. We would like to get home and see our families, and we'll just do that, and I'll call you in the morning."

So the next morning, I called him. We got up about eleven o'clock, and I called him and said, "Sir, we're all set to go." And he said, "Well, fine. You go on back. I'll just ride the back-up planes. President Kennedy will have a back-up plane with him,

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and when I meet him in San Antonio Thursday, I'll get on the back-up, and we'll go to Houston, and from Houston, we're going to go up to Fort Worth, and then we're going on to Dallas. I'll see you next week when we get back to Washington."

I said, "Fine, sir." And we took off and went on back to Washington. So I was not with the Vice President on the day of the assassination.

I went out and met the airplane that night when they arrived back at Andrews [A.F.B.]. It was just after dark, if you recall, and I saw the new President ever so briefly.

M: Probably was just concerned.

C: He was in such a state of concern and anguish. I didn't talk to him and I realized that he was concerned about the country and was concerned about Mrs. Kennedy and the Kennedy family.

M: A lot of confusion then, wasn't there?

C: A lot of confusion. There was confusion right here at Andrews. Confusion reigned supreme, if you will. And so I saw him, and he saw me. I didn't speak to him because I knew he had more problems than to worry about a little guy like me. I just wanted him to know that I was there to stand by him.

M: Did you ever talk to the pilot that was flying Air Force One, at that time, about what did happen during that period.

C: Oh, yes. Jim Swindal, the guy I flew with. We talked about it, although Jim didn't want to talk too much about it. But they got the body

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on board, and of course, they got the family back aboard; President Johnson and his family were aboard. And once they got everything organized and got off, I guess they really headed for home at about 41,000 feet, just fast as they could head for Washington. They were concerned. I read various stories and so forth that the new President--and in fact a lot of people--were concerned about conspiracies and so on. So I'm sure that there was a good deal of confusion even at that point. The crew, though, wouldn't necessarily have had a great deal to worry about, except to fly that airplane safely.

M: I noticed -- when was it, last week, when he was in his interview with Walter Cronkite--that he mentioned this phase of coming back. In fact, I guess the family was a little bit cool toward him at the time.

C: Well, I certainly have read that on a number of occasions, and there have been a number of reports, many of them have been conflicting, as to what their feelings were, and so on, that occurred just prior to the flight, during the flight, [and] just after the flight. But I can't lend anything to those comments, because I wasn't there, and I don't know.

M: How was President Johnson in flight?

C: Well, let me put it this way. He always trusted that airplane to me, totally. He questioned me, carefully, a lot of times about how the weather was; he questioned me on why I

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couldn't do certain things or why I was doing certain things.

M: Would he come up into the cockpit?

C: Oh, yes. He came into the cockpit many times. The fact of the matter is, I [have here], no, I guess it's at home, I've got a picture that he autographed for me where he's sitting in the cockpit looking over my shoulder. We're going somewhere. I don't even remember where it was. But he often came into the cockpit, kidded me some.

M: Pretty relaxed individual?

C: Very much so. He rested whenever he could on the airplane. I always was pleased and proud to think that, when he'd get aboard, he could, in fact, relax and lay down in the airplane and trust his life to me and my crew in the way that he did. That, therefore, made me more relaxed and more able to do my job better, the fact [that he felt that way].

M: He was never a nervous passenger.

C: No, he was not.

M: I often wonder. You see on TV, every once in a while, these groups of people who hate to fly and how nervous they can be.

C: Not the President. I will say that he would caution me from time to time about safety. "Remember, now, don't ever do anything that's not safe. We don't have to get there today." And I'd say, "Don't you ever worry about that, Mr. President."

M: There's a rumor that although he might be late in starting, he

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wanted to get places on time. In other words, he might get to your aircraft late, but he still wanted to make that ETA, wherever the . . .

C: We did have to labor under that . . .

M: (laughter). I imagine that put you in a bind.

C: . . . problem at times. Well, actually, what I always did was we always planned ten minutes pad; wherever we went, we tried to have a ten minute pad. That gave us enough time to fool with the controllers and various other agencies that might cause some delays for us. And we could miscalculate, of course. Meteorology has not become an accurate science yet, and I don't know if it ever will. So we always tried to plan a ten minute pad in there on our flight plans. Also, we never ran the airplane at full speed. You don't run your car at full speed, nor do you run an airplane at full speed.

M: No.

C: But on occasion, when things were getting tight, we could. And we could do it with complete safety, because a jet engine runs and functions just as well at 100 percent as it does at 90 percent. The only thing is: it takes more fuel, and it takes . . . Well, that's about it.

M: Of course, you were always well within your operating range.

C: We always had plenty of fuel, anyway, so if there came a time when we really had to pour the coal to it, we could. And we had that ten minutes extra pad, anyway. So we generally managed to

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make our ETAs, even though the President might be a little bit late.

M: I imagine he'd take advantage of you every now and then by cutting out that ten minutes when he realized you could make it.

C: Well, you know, he's a pretty sharp and shrewd fellow. And he always knew, for example, if I told him it was going to take three hours to go from Washington to the Midwest, that the chances are that I might have just a little hip pocket of latitude there. And so, he'd usually squeeze it out of me one way or the other. (Laughter). But that's the difference, you see, in a man that you can't ever fool. In other words, he's a man that you just simply. . .

M: Just too much native intelligence.

C: He's just got too much native intelligence. That's right.

M: How about the people that would go along with him? Was there a group that would go in the plane usually--sort of a standard company?

C: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, the President was quite interested in economy. It's been well documented and reported over the years about his penchant for saving dollars and turning off lights and saving water. Well, you could apply that across the board. He was economy minded in everything that he did and when it came to that airplane. For example, back in the days of President Kennedy, wherever they went, they always had a back-up airplane. You might

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not see it, but it was there. President Johnson says, "No more of that back-up airplane. We're not going to have it. We'll cut it out." So we didn't take it, except we did take it on the round the world trips because it was quite important to have back-up capability when you're in some foreign country.

M: Would you take the newsmen or anybody like that in it?

C: Well, we'd take the newsmen or staff or both. Yes.

M: But if it got in a bind, they got out, and he got in.

C: That's right; that's right. Leave them. Let them come back some other way. But as a general rule, he took all of his staff--including his cooks, the Secret Service, and everything--right on his airplane. In the interest of economy, [he] wouldn't let them go commercial, wouldn't let them take a back-up airplane. We didn't have a back-up airplane. We'd load everybody on that Air Force One, and away we'd go. Coming to Texas, we'd have forty, fifty people on there [by the] time you count the Secret Service details--and there's three shifts of those. You've got various clerks and stenographers.

M: Would it just be an extension of his office? He would work the whole time he was here.

C: Just an extension of his office.

M: He doesn't seem to relax ever, does he?

C: Never. I don't believe any President can ever relax. I think that the job, the institution if you will, is so big that no President can ever just completely relax and get away from it. He'd be

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sitting out here on his anch; there's always radios; there's always some aide walking up with an important telegram that he's got to read got to make a decision

M: What about the communications for him in Air Force One?

C: As good as could be had on a moving vehicle. We had enough long-range, single-side-band radios on there to conduct half a dozen simultaneous conversations and/or teletype communications. And you could either secure it or unsecure it, as you chose. Additionally, we had some UHF equipment that was very, very complex, but very, very sophisticated. It was of such quality--and would tie in to the regular Bell Telephone System--that it was actually clearer and better than your telephone as far as quality communications. We put that all in. I did, while I was there as the aide

M: How would you all find out about things like that? Would the companies bring it to you, or did your technical people in the Air Force have contact with it?

C: A combination of both. Oftentimes, we would learn of something that a company was trying to develop, let's say, and we'd go to them, and we'd say, "Look, we need this, and we read in a trade magazine that you're developing this piece of equipment here. Now, what we'd like to do is to have you further develop this to include this feature." And as it developed, we'd work with them; we'd engineer and fit it into an airplane, and tie it in to a satellite system or something like that.

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M: You actually tied in to satellites with it?

C: Well, let me put it this way: it can be done. We haven't got any satellites, yet, that can match up to the. . .

M: Well, that is something. So the plane itself became more and more refined.

C: All the time. It's just like everything else that's happening in this country today. We tried to stay abreast of the times and keep that airplane sophisticated enough to do the job that it had to do, which was to be a flying White House.

M: Could you tie in to the Hot Line in Moscow?

C: Sure. Tie in to anything, to anybody, anywhere, anytime.

M: So for the two or three hours he's there, he's in complete control still.

C: Let me give you how-it's-done. Wherever the President moves or travels, whether it be by car, whether he's in his home, whether he's in a hotel somewhere, there's always communications or ties to the White House. The White House, then, has lines, either through telephones or radio networks, that can put them into any communications network that we own in the world--simply through wire or radio. Well, then, it becomes a simple matter, on an airplane, to provide the equipment that can tie back into that main communication center which is the White House; and then all you've got to do is put it out through lines or cables or whatever to get it into the Bell Telephone System, or to get it into the Atlantic Cable, or

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however you want to [do it].

M: So your communication was always from the plane back to the White House, and from there out to whoever. . .

C: Well, not necessarily, not necessarily. It might be from the plane to a specially set-up ground station in Honolulu. But then it would go from Honolulu back, through the Pacific Cable, to the White House, and out through the United States.

M: And wherever he goes, in advance, there'll be somebody checking on this communications net and making sure that it is--

C: Making sure that it's available. Yes.

M: Were there any other special features of the plane, besides the communications?

C: Well, we had, of course, what I said a while ago. It's the same airplane as TWA or American. We probably kept it more up-to-date than they would, because, as new developments occurred in the instrument flying equipment, for example, we saw to it that it was available on that airplane. We kept it as sophisticated as the state of the art would permit. The reason being, we wanted there never to be any room for any criticism by any agency, whether it be the FAA, or the Airline Pilots' Association, or the Benevolent Motherhood Society, or whoever, that we weren't providing everything in the world humanly possible for the protection of the President of the United States, and we saw to it that that was always the case.

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M: How about your maintenance? I imagine you watched that pretty closely yourself.

C: We watched it pretty close; we carried on a very strict quality control system. We were very careful in our selection of maintenance people; we picked only those most dedicated and motivated individuals that are available in the entire United States Air Force.

M: Did you select the rest of the crew also?

C: Oh, I selected every single man on the flight crew. I did not personally select all the maintenance men, but I had my people select all the maintenance men.

M: How many pilots did you have?

C: I had three: myself; a Lieutenant Colonel Paul Thornhill, who incidentally is living in this area--he's retired now--he's living in Oak Hill; and a Major Donald Short, who is currently the chief pilot for Northrop Aviation.

M: Did he retire also?

C: He retired, yes--a young man, 37 years old. But he actually did retire. He enlisted when he was 17 years old; was in the Marines, fought in Korea, wounded two or three times; came back and got himself a pilot's rating; had been in the military airlift system for a number of years and had 11,000 hours or so of flying time--quite an accomplished aviator in the short time he'd been a pilot.

M: Did you ever have a breakdown or a failure in Air Force One?

C: Never had a delay or a breakdown or a failure.

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M: That is a maintenance record, isn't it?

C: And in the years that I flew it, we never had a single breakdown or a delay. Now, we had some failures, but we had back-up systems, and we had safety systems that would permit us to continue. We had a failure of a radio, or we'd have a failure of some little system or something, but it always happened while we were en route, and wherever we landed at the next stop, we were able to get it fixed so that we could continue.

M: Did you ever see any of the foreign equivalents of Air Force One? Any of the other . . .

C: To my knowledge, there are not, really, any equivalents. There are planes that are sort of designated to carry a president or to carry . . .

M: This is really a unique plane, isn't it?

C: It's the only one in the world.

M: How about your security arrangements for it?

C: We took care of those ourselves. We had our own security system, right there at Andrews, and we kept the point guard on the airplane, tail and nose, inside of an already secured area, twenty-four hours a day; whenever we were on the road, or when we were travelling, we carried our own security force right on the airplane with us. But we would augment those four security men with local security forces, either civilian police or military police, or both, depending on the circumstances existing at wherever we were going.

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M: How about the Secret Service? Did they get into it?

C: The Secret Service reviewed our security plans for technical accuracy, yes, but that's all. They didn't really do any of the physical security. They reviewed our procedures; they periodically ran through and made spot-checks to see that nobody was ever able to plant explosives on the airplane; they from time to time would spot-check luggage with an X-ray machine and other techniques that they use.

M: Were there ever any security incidents with regard to the plane? Anybody trying to board it, or any threats against it?

C: None that I am personally aware of. No threats against it other than we had a time or two [when] we were told that a letter had been received that somebody was going to be in the area that was a nut. As far as them trying to put something aboard, or coming out there and taking a potshot at us, we had no personal knowledge of anything of that nature.

M: How about your in-flight protection, once you were airborne? Was there any, or you just . . .

C: Just like any other airplane in the sky. I must say, though, that the FAA--the Federal Aviation Agency--would carefully watch this flight plan and try to give us warning of any aircraft on the radar scope that might be on a collision course even though they might not know what the altitude was, but if it looked like it was going to be on the same course to collide with us, regardless of altitude, they'd vector us or vector the other airplane to get

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him out of the way. They were careful to give us traffic advisories in this regard. They always saw to it that we had a certain amount of priority to get to where we were going without undue, circuitous routing, and so on.

M: As it should be. How about when you went into Vietnam? I guess then the security that they put out was ground. But was there anything . . . ?

C: Well, yes. When we went into Vietnam, we asked for--I did, just on my own authority asked that there be a friendly fighter aircraft in the vicinity and flying a cover for us. Not that I anticipated that anybody would ever attack us, because the North Vietnamese didn't have anything that could attack from the distances they would have had to go. But I just felt like that we were in a war zone, that we should . . .

M: Why take a chance?

C: . . . have the support. The fighters were there; they were available; and they came up and flew with us on both occasions. You know, we went to Vietnam twice: went on the Asian trip in 1966 and then we went on the round-the-world trip when President Johnson went to pay his last respects to Prime Minister Holt in 1967. And so, both times when we went into Vietnam, I asked for and got airborne security which was in the form of a half a dozen fighter planes.

M: I understand that--on that trip to the service for Prime Minister Holt--that the plane cracked the runway when you came in. Was that right?

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C: I didn't know about it.

M: Somewhere I had read that, coming in, it had cracked the runway, and you'd had to take off from another runway. Well, I must have been completely mistaken

C: I suspect what you might be talking about, I do remember that the Aussies call their ramp where we park "Tarmac." And it sat out there in the heat on this asphalt, or Tarmac; and these heavy tires or rather, these hard, high-pressure tires, on that Tarmac and in that heavy heat, caused some of that Tarmac to separate from its underpinnings or underlayment. And when we rolled the airplane away from where we'd had it parked, with the tug, prior to the time the President departed, it peeled up some Tarmac about that thick. [Two inches] We had to go out there and scrape it off with a chisel or something, off the tires so they wouldn't be unbalanced when we did make a take-off. But we didn't crack any runways that I recall.

M: There was a story, incidentally--in yesterday's Austin American, the one about Colonel Albertazzie--about one instance of running out of root beer on the flight; that he [Johnson] was really strong on having that available, and the steward evidently ran out of it, and he really blew up. Was this reasonably accurate?

C: I wouldn't say that the President really blew up. He was the kind of man, of course, that should be able to get certain things that he liked, when he wanted them, hence there really shouldn't be any reason for people like myself or my stewards not to have them aboard. There would be occasions, from time to time, when, through circumstances possibly beyond our

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control, and in other cases, maybe in our control, but just a human oversight, we might not have root beer, or Fresca, or something like that which was a favorite drink of his. And we might be fussed at a little bit, but I wouldn't say that he . . .

M: Every once in a while in the interviews you hear about people who talk about the "Johnson treatment" when he would really get angry at something that happened. Did this ever happen with you?

C: Well, yes, certainly, if President Johnson were quite angry . . . I wouldn't say it would be because of something I had done or not done, some dereliction on my part. I think--as with many of us, myself included, possibly you--that when we get a little bit frustrated about something that isn't going just right to suit us, we may pick on a friend, somebody that we love, to take our wrath out on, and this is a normal reaction. I sometimes get mad here in my office about something not going right, and instead of taking it out on the guy that I really ought to be taking it out on, I go home and take it out on my wife. And so President Johnson, I think, is not unlike anybody else in that regard. He would find something he didn't like; I happened to be in the line of fire, and would catch some flak. But I could attribute that to the fact that the man is pressured, he's got a lot on his mind, he's entitled to have an outlet, an escape valve, and if I make a good one, I'm just glad to oblige.

M: You know, it was interesting what you said about your wife. Because in the various interviews, it seems that one constant has been the

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high regard that everyone holds Mrs. Johnson in. She evidently is quite a tremendous lady.

C: She is a delightful lady. I talked to her just last night, and I hadn't seen her or talked to her in three or four months, but she called me last night and asked me how the weather was going to be today for a flight to Dallas. I told her that I didn't think it was going to be too good, but I said, "You go ahead and don't worry about it now tonight. And in the morning before you get up, I'm going to call your switchboard,"-- at where she's staying--"and I'll let them know whether you should go or not." So I called this morning. I didn't talk to her this morning, but I called down there and told the switchboard to be sure and tell her, when they woke her up, that it would be my recommendation that she just put it off and not go.

M: A good recommendation today. It's a real mess.

C: But she is--to answer your specific question--she's a delightful lady, and I feel it a privilege and an honor to have served her.

M: How about the girls? What are they like? And their husbands now? Have you met them?

C: Major Robb was one of those young men that worked for me as a social aide, and he's a fine lad. Just a topnotch, 100 percent, mainline, all-American boy. And Lynda, the older of the two girls, could be compared with any young teenager. Of course, I've known her since way back when she was sixteen years old or so, as she developed into young womanhood and then to a young married woman. I have the

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highest regard for her. She's got a good head on her shoulders.

M: She's about to have another child now, I think, isn't she?

C: I haven't heard from her lately, and I don't know. I haven't talked to the President or Mrs. Johnson about that, so I really don't know. When she and Captain Robb decided that they wanted to get married, I was the first fellow they told. They called me up into the solarium in the White House from my office and said they wanted to get my advice on how they should bring it to the attention of President and Mrs. Johnson. I said, "Well, just go on in there and tell them." And so I congratulated them on their mutual choice, and they went on from there and were married.

M: They've evidently been very happy.

C: And of course, young Pat, I've known him since he was about 16 or 17, as well as Luci. When they were first going together, Pat was a scrawny, skinny little kid. He's grown up to be quite a fine young man. Living here in Austin now. Haven't seen him lately, but . . .

M: He was going to the University, I think, wasn't he, the last I heard? Parttime student or something like that; maybe that's wrong.

C: In any event, he's a fine lad, and Luci's a fine little girl, and of course, again, harking back to days gone by, but I've known her since she was a little bitty tyke about 12. And we've had her on our airplane so many times, back even without the President, when the plane happened to be going back to Washington. One time we carried her on the Jetstar--she and some of the President's, or the

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Vice President's, staff. She came aboard just--

M: Must be a hard way to grow up, though, I guess, to have that much spotlight always on you.

C: You know, I would imagine that's probably right. My own children . . . I've got two daughters and a son at home, and I've got one girl that's married, living in Washington. And even in my case--we weren't spotlighted; nothing like the President and his family would be--but I think it's kind of hard on kids to grow up in the spotlight and always subject to a good deal of criticism, reading bad things about yourself in the newspapers.

M: Right. And about your father, too.

C: About your father. And I'm sure that bothers them. But I'll tell you, they're remarkably well-adjusted kids for the life that they've had to live all these years.

M: Mrs. Johnson must have spent a lot of time with them.

C: Well, I tell you, both President and Mrs. Johnson spent a lot of time with them. I've been around . . .

M: Must have been difficult for him. As involved as he was . . .

C: Well, not necessarily, you take [this]: I've been up many times when he'd call me up to talk about something, or ask me some questions about why I hadn't done something, or for whatever reason. I'd be called up into his quarters, either at the Ranch out here or at the White House. I've walked in there, and he'd still be in bed--you know--in his pajamas, maybe early some morning at eight o'clock, and one of the girls would be up laying in bed with him. You know,

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just . . .

M: Just like any other family.

C: Sure, just like me and my kids, you know, on a Sunday morning when I feel like sleeping late. I sometimes get my kids in there. So I think that, while he is the President--and whoever the President is, certainly, I believe we'd all agree, is probably the most powerful single man in the world, President of the United States--he is nonetheless a human being. He gets up every morning, puts on his britches one leg at a time same as I do. And he's got feelings, and he's got a family that he loves . . . Of course, prior to my being associated with President Johnson and always looking at the Presidency through rose-colored lenses of the newspapers, TV and so on, you always think that the President is unattainable, he's untouchable, but he's just a human being. He gets an ache in his leg just like you do. While he's always got to be smiling before the press, he might feel just as bad as anybody else.

M: When he'd come back down to the anch, would he usually have a lot of his friends from this area come in to see him? Did he always seem to have time for them?

C: I wouldn't say that he had a lot; he had about what you'd consider a normal amount of friends. If, for example, you were visiting here at a summer home, or off on sort of a vacation, a working vacation, you'd try to have as many of your old, close friends as you could. I'd think that he probably did that just like anybody else. In

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addition to that, though, he had to sandwich in all these official things, guests, functions and events, and still try to lead somewhat of a normal life. I'd say it's quite difficult.

M: Other people have talked about his taking the staff into his family. Did there get to be more than just a business relationship with the people that worked for him?

C: I would say that there were certain of his staff that enjoyed that type of relationship, yes. Always there are a few people on anyone's staff that they feel closer to than others. I would say that there were half a dozen or so that were that way with President Johnson and Mrs. Johnson. That sort of makes it better. You're better able to serve, I think, if you feel like what you're doing is needed and wanted.

M: Was your family [included]? You all were included once in a while, I guess, at social functions out at the house?

C: Oh, yes. The President was always very warm and thoughtful and compassionate with my family. I think he felt like--at times anyway--that we were gone a good deal and we were away from our families and had to travel, be at the Ranch when he was down here for extended periods of time, and I always stayed right there with the President. And so he was generous in asking them to go to functions and affairs at the White House. On those occasions when we were down here at Christmas time, on two or three occasions, the President asked me if I'd brought my family down, and I said "No, I don't have that authority. You see, normally, in the military . . .

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And he said, "Well, I'm inviting them. Get them on an airplane and bring them down here." So the next airplane coming, I'd bring my family down, and they'd be able to visit their grandparents here in Austin and all. So he was very generous in that regard.

M: He was people-oriented, I guess, then?

C: Oh, unquestionably. Unquestionably. He was just a warm, compassionate human being.

M: How'd your daughters and your son react to this, being this close to the Presidency?

C: Oh, I'd say that they were like most kids. (Laughter). They just thought it was sort of commonplace, you know. They don't get too excited about anything. My oldest daughter was--I think she was excited and impressed by the fact that she got to know a President, see one in the flesh, but my other kids--they were younger--they weren't really too impressed. They acted impressed at the moment, but you get them back away, and somebody would say something to them, "Oh, yeah. We rode the President's airplane."

M: He has a reputation for being fairly hard on the brass. Would you agree with this, or did you see any of this? Quite questioning, I guess, would be . . .

C: I wouldn't say that he's fairly hard; I'd just say that he's the kind of man that expects if you say that something's going to be done, he expects it to be done. He expects perfection. If you say, "Yes, sir, I took care of that," well, then you better well have taken care of it. But I don't find that any more unusual than a lot

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of other assignments that I've had. For example if I tell my staff here I would like something done, they fare-the-well better take care of it. Otherwise, they're going to have to answer to me. Well, I think President Johnson is not unlike most other people who have large domains to manage. You just have to insist upon perfection. Otherwise, you can't get the job done that you've got the charter to do.

M: How about from his senior commanders, for instance. Did you have much contact, for instance, with the Chiefs of Staff or the high level service people?

C: Not other than administratively. In other words, the military aide to the President functions as the administrative go-between between the departments of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and so on. You don't, as military aide, get into national policy, such as Vietnam and . . .

M: It must be a compromising position. I notice that Colonel [William G.] Draper retired after President Eisenhower was no longer President. And you mentioned that your predecessor, General Clifton, had retired. Does it put you in a [difficult position]? Well, of course, it wouldn't with you, obviously. But do you think it kind of put them in a bad relationship with their own service?

C: Well, I've often wondered about this myself. In other words, you find yourself at times at odds. I did, when I was military aide to the President. We had to get certain things done, and sometimes you just had to sort of trample over anybody that got in your way.

M: The administrative mind problem, to a great degree.

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C: Yes. And I used to be troubled about this somewhat, particularly since I was the most junior military aide that had ever been the military aide to the President. I used to be troubled that some of the people that I had to step on would come back to haunt me sometime. But I tried to develop this philosophy while I was there in the White House: that I never served my own interests.

I simply devoted myself in an abstract way to serving and only doing exactly what the President wanted, without putting any interpretation of my own on it whatsoever. And I tried to point out as I dealt with the people in the Pentagon, regardless of whether it be Navy, Air Force, Army, Marines or whatever, that I was fair and just in everything that I did.

Even at that, once in a while, when we had to see that somebody got the axe or something happened that this particular one-star or two-star or even three-star general didn't like, we had to force an issue down their throat, that I tried to do it just with integrity and sincerity and forthrightness and get the job done. And only in that context.

I worried a great deal about it, and I still do. But I don't feel much anguish from it.

M: You'd have had to have done it the same way again, if you were doing it again.

C: Yes, that's right.

In other words, what I'm saying is, now that I'm the commander here. I've been the commander here for sixteen or eighteen months and I've been out of the aide's office in the White House for almost

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two years. I felt like, when I first got here, that I would feel some pressure from some of the people that might have a sore head for me. But I haven't. I sometimes wonder how I'm going to be affected in later years. I wonder whether or not people will think that, "Well, he was military aide to the President; that's the only way he got where he is; we're not going to promote him; we'll put him out to pasture and let him sit here for the rest of his life." I haven't yet gone far enough down the road to see whether that's really going to affect me or not.

M: So it's hard to judge what the overall effect on your career has been, or is going to be.

C: Well, in looking at it ahead, yes. But when you look at it in retrospect, I look at it this way--you're an ex-military man--and I said to myself, "Well, there, but for the grace of God, go I. I might be a lieutenant colonel today had I not been selected to be the aide to the President. I might have only made colonel, that might have been as high as I'd ever go, if I hadn't been selected to be the military aide to the President." So, in other words, who knows? Maybe I'm two grades higher than I would've been anyway, see?

M: How'd you happen to go the Vietnam, or happen to leave in '68?

C: Oh, I chose to go. I wanted to go. In fact, I wanted to go over there and fly a full combat tour, but they wouldn't let me. I flew 17 missions. And General [George E.] Brown called me one morning at six o'clock--this was in early January, I believe, in

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'69, or sometime along in there--General Brown called me and said, "Cross, how long would it take you to get out of here and get home?" I said, "Well, sir, I don't know. Why?" He said, "General [John P.] McConnell called me this morning and told me to get you home."

M: That's getting pretty close to the source, then. Did you ever talk to President Johnson about Vietnam?

C: Well, yes, in an indirect way. We talked about it, still do, when I talk to him. "How was it over there? What do you think about the situation over there?" Just like you and I might sit and talk about Vietnam. I never talked to him in any policy context. I left that to the experts, like Mr. [Walt W.] Rostow and General [Earle G.] Wheeler, General [William] Westmoreland, Mr. [Robert] McNamara.

M: Did he express any anguish, or any --of course, there was obvious concern, but--

C: He was always concerned about the boys, and he expressed some anguish to me about the numbers of boys that we lost over there in the years that he was in Washington. He expressed anguish to me that the letters of his expression of sorrow that went to the family be compassionate, from the heart, from him. And we tried our best to see to it that every letter that came from a mother, or from a wife, or a father, or a relative, was carefully reviewed, and looked at by the President, to let the people know just how much anguish, heartfelt sorrow, he really felt for them. So we talked, yes, but not so much as President and military aide as just two

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men that are concerned about something, or two friends.

M: How about the people who were working for you when you were in Vietnam? What was their attitude toward him?

C: You mean when I went over there as a combat [pilot]? Just like the attitude of all these boys that I have in this wing right now. That they're there to do the job and they'll go until they drop. They'll continue to function over there, because each and every man in the Air Force--of course, I don't deal with the Army that much; we're not in that business, we're away from their part of the war, and so I don't deal with them--but every single man that we've got here in this Air Force, on this base, most of them have been to Vietnam. If they haven't, they'll go to Vietnam. They're all volunteers, and every one of them are ready. I haven't got a single pilot on my base that flies these RF-4's, these combat airplanes here, that hasn't done a tour in Vietnam.

M: This must have been a real change for you, when you shifted from the 707 to--

C: Quite much. It sure was.

M: Had you flown single-engine jets before?

C: I'd flown F-80's in the Philippines in 1950, in preparation for what I hoped to be a fighter assignment in Korea, but I never did get my fighter assignment. That's all the single-engine jets that I'd ever flown before I got these RF-4's. It's been quite an experience for me; I've enjoyed it immensely; I enjoyed thoroughly my opportunity to go over and see some actual combat, fly some

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actual combat. And I wouldn't suggest here that I like combat; I don't. I don't think anybody likes to fight or likes war. But somebody's got to do it; and if we're not fighting in Vietnam, we may fight somewhere else sometime. We may have to help Israel; there's no telling, I just don't know. But the fact is, as a military commander, it's important for me to understand what my boys that I'm training here--that I have here, that are going to Vietnam--have to undergo when they go out and meet the enemy. So I thoroughly enjoyed my opportunity to be over in Vietnam and fly combat and see some of the problems that my guys have to face when they do go over there.

M: Do you think that the President was hampered by the security classification, the information he dealt with, and replying to its critics very often? Or could he pretty freely give out what he knew?

C: I'd say that any President, certainly President Johnson included, is always hampered by the amount of information that he can release when he has to consider the national security aspects of what he is releasing, whether it be to the Congress, to the press, or whoever. But he is hampered by that. He isn't able to adequately defend himself against his critics, simply because the President is the one man in the United States that really has the full story, much of it classified, and very highly classified. Much of it would have to be classed as truly in the national interest and could not be released to anybody, even the Congress, even the Chairman of

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the Armed Services Committee. Who but Lyndon Johnson would know that so well? Because he served as Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, Vice President, served in the Congress, Majority Leader, and President.

M: Were any of the trips that you took particularly memorable, any of them that really stand out in your mind?

C: Every trip that I ever took with the President was a memorable trip for me. It's an experience I'll never forget; it's the making of history; and I consider myself privileged to have been given the opportunity to participate in history in the making. I guess the most memorable one of all, though, was the one around the world where we went to Australia to pay last respects to Prime Minister [Harold] Holt. The President called me, after it was announced that Prime Minister Holt had been drowned, and he said, "Cross, we may want to go to Australia tomorrow. You'd better get my big plane out and make sure it's ready to go." I said, "Mr. President, you'll recall, sir, that I sent you a note two weeks ago that the big plane is in Lockheed Air Service contract facility in New York, and it won't be ready for forty-five days." And he said, "Well, go up there, and get it fixed, and get it back down here. We want to leave tomorrow." Well, I had just been the previous day, and they had that airplane scattered all over the hangar. It had been dismantled, practically, completely. And it'd taken them two weeks just to tear it down, you know. If it takes two weeks to tear it apart, it takes at least four just to put it back

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together. And so I chuckled, and I said, "Well, Mr. President, it's impossible. There's no way." He said, "Well, you'd better take one of those others out there. I don't know why in the world you let my airplane get off when I want to go somewhere." I said, "Well, yes sir, Mr. President, I apologize for that, but we'll take one of these others and get it fixed up and ready to go." And he said, "Well, you'd better fix it up so you'll have a nice, quiet bedroom, a place that I can sleep on there." "Yes, sir."

So I started some of my boys--some of these fine young men that I was talking about--that I selected for the maintenance crew. I said, "Now, boys, let's take this other airplane. We'll take 'x' number of seats out of it, and we'll put a little partition up here, and we'll put this curtain up here; and we'll do this, and we'll do that, and we'll use that foam padding stuff.

M: As an insulator, I guess.

C: As an insulator. And we stitched, and sewed, and hammered, and knocked, and banged, and put beds, double beds, and whatnot in there, and took seats out, and changed other seats around. And sure enough, when we got ready to go, we had that thing practically completely rebuilt. And, while it was not real worthy of the Presidency, it was very comfortable. And we took off; went all the way to Australia. Well, we had to stop in California for fuel; stopped in Honolulu for fuel; stopped in Pango Pango--Pago Pago, I guess it is--in American Samoa, for fuel; and then went on in

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to Canberra.

And as we arrived at Canberra, just at daylight or a little after daylight--it was a beautiful morning--the President came in the cockpit. He said, "Cross, you look tired." I said, "Yes, sir, I am." It'd been about twenty-seven hours since we left Washington. He said, "Well, you go on and go to bed. You're going to be sleeping up close to me there in the Rex Hotel." I said, "Well, thank you, Mr. President, I'll be available if you need me." He said, "No, I'm not going to bother you." He said, "You go on up there and rest." He said, "We'll leave here in about thirty-six hours. You make some plans to go maybe up to Vietnam. Maybe we'll go to Thailand."

M: Just sort of offhand: "go to Vietnam," huh?

C: "Maybe." He said, "And we might want to go by and see the Pope. We might want to stop off and see Ayub [Khan] . . . "

M: Khan. In Pakistan?

C: Yes. Ayub Khan. He said, "But, now, don't go telling anybody." I said, "No, sir, I won't tell anybody." And I didn't; I didn't tell a soul; I didn't tell the pilot of the Pan American press plane, old Doug Moody, who is a good, fine lad and a friend, a long time friend; I didn't tell Mr. Rostow; I didn't tell anybody. I just put all this back in my computer here, and sort of saved it and tried to make some plans on my own, what I would do if we went this way or this way. And after about two hours in bed, the phone rang. It was the President. He wanted me to come

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around to his room and talk, so I went around and talked, and that's about all we did while we were in Australia. We talked, worried, fretted with different plans and situations. And I briefed him on various weather situations, and if we went to Korat, or if we went to Taklee, [?] which is in Thailand, or if we went into Udorn, or Ubon, rather, Thailand; and if we went from there back to Cam Ranh Bay, or went from there back to Bien Hoa, which is near Saigon, or went from there back to Saigon itself, and then if we took off from there and went to Karachi, what that would do, and what time we'd arrive if we left here at a certain time; what time we'd arrive at Karachi; and what time we'd arrive at Rome, if we decide to stop at Rome;

There was a million different alternatives that we had here. And we finally worked all of them out, and never did really arrive at a solution. Simply because there were considerations that the President was concerned about--namely, a Communist demonstration in Rome. We were trying to avoid a confrontation there with the Roman Communist Party, the Italian Communist Party. We didn't have too many real careful plans laid about our communications network that we always had to have preceeding us.

M: I guess you had really souped up this plane with communications equipment, too.

C: Yes. We had to do everything, practically, from this airplane. I might add that that airplane, communications-wise, was just like Air Force One. It didn't have the same interior in it, but

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it had the same communications capability.

M: It was, in essence then, a back-up, just available.

C: Oh, yes. Right. We had four of them altogether. We had number one, and then we had the three back-up planes. The only difference was, the interior was much more austere in the three back-up planes. They didn't have the range. They didn't have the long wing. They didn't have the extra fuel and a lot of other features. But essentially, they were just as good as the 707's. The only thing we had to do was to fix up the interior so it would make it a little more comfortable for him.

But we went ahead, and we finally took off from Canberra; went to Melbourne; waited there about four hours while the President went over and went through the memorial ceremony. Then we took off from Melbourne and went to Darwin; stayed there an hour or so for fuel; from Darwin to Korat, Thailand, where the President spoke to some of the combat pilots and some of the combat crewmen there.

M: Did you observe the reaction of the people when he was . . . ?

C: Oh, yes. Always just astounding welcome for this President wherever he went. The people, our military people in particular I think, always appreciated the President.

In any event, we went from there to Cam Ranh, and the troops just turned out in mass at Cam Ranh, just overwhelmed him, almost, with their praise of the President and their adoration of the President. And we went from there to Karachi and visited with

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Ayub Khan for a while.

In the meantime, I was trying to lay plans as best I could, with the minimal communications gear that we had and the maximum use that we needed to make of it, to try to get fuel and ground communications, as well as ground transportation, if we should go into Rome, and then, at the same time, not tip our hand that we were going. And this is massive amounts of wire service, massive amounts of helicopters and land transportation, parking and stairs. Stairs to get off an airplane becomes a major problem, you know, when you can't tell anybody about it. And when you're dealing with the President, you've got to have a set of stairs. You can't just drive up to a fence somewhere, throw a rope out, and say, "Okay, Mr. President. There's your rope. Get off." You just don't do that. But at the same time, you don't telegraph what you're about to do to somebody by calling ahead and saying, "Hey, we're going to land at Champino Airport at Rome instead of the other airport"--I can't remember the name of it--"and we've got to have the stairs over there, and we've got to have security, and we've got to have telephones. We've got to have helicopters." So it becomes a bit of a problem.

But we went on, and we made it. And it was really an epic journey. We landed at Rome, and he saw the Pope, and we slipped out of there, and the Communists never realized we were there. And we took off then and went to Lajes in the Azores, which is a mid-Atlantic fueling stop. I've been there many, many times when

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I was flying the Atlantic in the MAC system. And we revisited that place about two in the morning.

I called the base commander ahead of time, and I said, "It's Christmas Eve." And this was 2:00 a.m. on Christmas Eve, 1967. I said, "How about opening the PX for the President's party including the crew of this airplane? None of us have had a chance to do any Christmas shopping for our wives and children." We'd been gone, I think, four and a half days at that point. And the base commander opened that PX in the middle of the night, and the President, and his family, and his friends, and his guests, as well as his staff including his armed forces aide, James U. Cross, went to the PX and did our Christmas shopping at 2:00 a.m. Christmas Eve morning.

And we left there then, and went back to Andrews, arrived there at about 7:30 a.m. Christmas Eve--going with the sun--7:30 a.m. Christmas Eve morning after four and a half days of the most tortuous, but the most memorable, trip that I recommend to you to ever make. It was real torture in so far as the physical aspects of it from my standpoint of it and my staff, both my flight crew as well as my aide staff.

M: How did it wear on him? Did he seem to [hold up well]? Did he manage to stay rested?

C: He stayed rested, yes. Oh, I'm sure it wore on him, because a man of his age and a man in a position he's in, with all the worries and responsibilities he's had, while he's resting, it isn't like

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he's resting now. And the simple fact that he's constantly in motion, and noises, and the clock is never really where it ought to be . . . You know, when you're in a jet airplane, and your inner clock just gets all messed up. It was an epic journey--you could put it--and one that I'll be forever grateful that I had the opportunity to be on, in spite of the fact that I've never been quite so tired and exhausted in my entire life.

M: I see. Well. Were there any of the other people that you flew . . . Did you ever fly any of the other VIP's that came? [Konrad] Adenauer?

C: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, it seems to me that I took Mr. Adenauer . . . No, no, not Konrad Adenauer; the other one, [Ludwig] Erhard.

M: To the Ranch?

C: No. I took Chancellor Erhard from Washington to Florida somewhere, but I can't recall where it was now. I believe I picked up Erhard at the Ranch and brought him from the Ranch over to Bergstrom. So, yes, I have flown a lot of the dignitaries that visited the President.

He sent his plane one time to Minneapolis, one night, to pick up all the governors that were conferring out there. I believe that was 1965. He had some sort of domestic problem in Washington, and he sent his plane, and I went out and picked up all the governors in Minneapolis, brought them back to Washington, and then saw to it that they got on helicopters and went to the

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White House.

M: Any of them make any comments about the plane?

C: Oh, again, I would just like to re-emphasize that governors, like presidents, are human beings; and they all just sat around looking. "Boy this is great! Man, I really ought to have one of these for myself." You know, like you would, or I would.

M: Oh, absolutely.

C: That's the one thing, I guess, that I learned when I was in Washington.

M: Do you have any little insights, or anecdotes, or anything, you'd like to add?

C: No, not particularly. I think that history will sometime, someday record that President Johnson was greatly maligned during his years in the Presidency. I think that, somewhere down the road, that he will be exonerated from the status that he now holds which certainly is not one of belovedness, as I'm sure all of us would like to be considered by history.

M: Yes.

C: I look forward to that day. I would hope that it would occur in his lifetime, because he has been such an intense patriot. interested in his country and interested in his fellow man. But if it doesn't occur in his lifetime, I sure do hope it does in mine, so that I can go ahead then and help spread the word, "See, I told you so."

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M: Did you ever notice anything of the people who were on the staff other than you? Did they all pretty much have the same feeling, or were there some that . . .?

C: No, there were people who didn't agree with the President. I wouldn't say that they were his . . . You remember, earlier in this interview, I said that there were half a dozen people or so that the President sort of, if not took into his family, almost included as part of his family. Well, those people served him and served him well--loyal, intense friends and workers. But there were those others that I thought were wolves in sheep's clothing, that didn't always serve his interests. They were serving a selfish interest, primarily their own. They are the kind of people that always seek the seat of power, and they try to hook on like a leech, or like a fishhook, to the coattails of somebody that's great, and pull themselves up by this method. There were a number of them on board in the Kennedy years with President Kennedy. I think many of them, who had been on the fringes of being in the Kennedy movement, saw an opportunity to grab on to President Johnson and really become powerful and big as this changeover of the power structure occurred. In other words, they were on the fringes of the Kennedy, and all of a sudden, they hop right up and say, "Here I am, Mr. President. I'm ready to serve you." But they weren't really ready to serve the President. They were serving themselves. And I hope that somebody will record who they are.

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M: Was he able to spot this very readily?

C: I think, probably, that he was. Yes. I think that many of them were not long in showing their true colors, because they jumped the ship.

M: And they weren't in that five or six, that small group, that came so close?

C: Absolutely not.

M: None of that bunch fell out?

C: Oh, no.

M: Well, that's good.

C: None of those close associates of the President ever fell out. Simply because they were loyal patriots, loyal servants of the President and his family, and they had no interest to serve other than his.

M: Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

C: I think not.

M: Thank you very much for your time.

C: I appreciate your coming and giving me the opportunity to say something that, one day, may reflect a little bit on history and on the greatness of what I consider a great man.

M: Thank you very much.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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