INTERVIEW V

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INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. Davis' office in Washington, D.C.

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D: Most of what I remember about 1965 is his effort to get as much legislation passed as possible.

G: Did he have a sense of urgency about it?

D: Oh, yes! You know, I think in later years we were told that the President, shortly after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, called [Joseph A.] Califano and the White House inner circle and said, "Look, fellas, I know that there's a lot of good will out there in the aftermath of the assassination. I've got a lot of support; I've got very good ratings in what people think of me, but that is fleeting. It doesn't last forever. You guys go back to your desks and come up with as many ideas as you can for legislation this country needs and we'll try to get as much of it passed as we can." And that's how this whole effort began to get Great Society programming through the Congress. And he, as you know, passed some landmark legislation the first months of the Johnson Administration. He had all these pens that he was distributing to everybody at these wild bill-signing ceremonies at the While House. The reporters were getting pens. Congressmen were getting pens.

Our children were getting pens, because he was signing legislation like it was an assembly line and, as a matter of fact, he was so proud of that, that he put up a display case in the White House press room, with a hundred pens and a description of each bill that each of the pen was used for, to show this landmark legislation. There was an inscription on it. Something like, "Never before in history"--or words to that effect; this had been a remarkable period and these pens bore testimony to the administration's effort and support to that effect. And a lot of the bills dealt with the environment, interestingly enough.

G: Anything on the highway beautification legislation?

D: Well, the other . . . no, I don't remember a great deal about legislation specifically, because generally if you covered the White House, the Hill did a lot of that for you. Your Hill reporters covered that.

I do remember Mrs. Johnson calling attention to the highway beautification projects that she was involved in, and infuriating all the junk yard owners around the country because she was on this kick of planting trees around junk yards and getting rid of unsightly junk yards near the highway interchanges and that sort of thing, and so they--she had all these scrap yards around the country up in arms because she wanted to get rid of them or move them off the thoroughfares.

And of course on presidential trips, the White House press office was pretty good at drawing our attention to the beautification program, and then the President [would] allude to it, sometimes by talking about going upstairs in the White House and finding Laurance Rockefeller, who was involved in Lady Bird's beautification project. And LBJ

would go up to his bedroom, he'd say, and there was Laurance Rockefeller and Mrs. Johnson talking about beautification. Wherever he went in the White House, he'd find the two of them talking beautification. She had Rockefeller's ear.

The remarkable thing about that is that here in Washington today in 1990, when you have visitors who come to town, many of them will say, "Wasn't Lady Bird a wonderful person? Look what she did to Washington?" You still hear that. A lot of people--it's not twenty-five years since all that started and people still attribute to Lady Bird those beautiful tulips around the Ellipse and the Tidal Basin--you come down [to] that area in April and May, and it's absolutely glorious in yellows and reds and oranges, all those wonderful tulips, and Lady Bird gets the credit for that. I don't remember as a reporter that we spent much time really on the legislative aspects of it, but we do remember that whenever the President had a chance, he was a pretty good PR man in promoting her or the projects by mentioning little asides in his speeches without being overt about it. See, as I said the last time I saw you, that Johnson was a better performer than he got credit for and I think he would have been even better if he wasn't so self-conscious about his looks. If he would have just been himself, I think he'd have been a better television performer.

G: Was he self-conscious about his looks?

D: I think he was. Doug Cater says the President thought he was ugly--thought of himself as ugly and was always comparing himself to John F. Kennedy subconsciously. And yet I've been in situations where Johnson--and I'm a child of television; I think I know a little bit about television. I've been in situations where he was as natural--where he was not on

nationwide television, where it was being filmed locally--where his delivery was superb. He could be electrifying. He didn't need the script. He was very good at ad-libbing. But then he brought those invisible teleprompters in, and then he wore contacts for a while, I think, and they were uncomfortable and he squinted his eyes. If he had been himself he would have been far more successful. He knew--I think next to Ronald Reagan probably, in the area of communications--he knew pretty much the power of television. He was a television station owner and he knew that television had an impact on public policy. He had that White House theater rigged downstairs with network television crews so he could go on the air in an instant, and did from time to time. I think he overexposed himself sometimes.

G: You talked about the environmental legislation. Any insights on his attitude toward the environment?

D: Well, I recall he talked about it.

G: Any trips that you went on with him that would--?

D: I'm trying to remember whether there were trips. I know that he talked about the environment in the sense that he was a farm boy, a country boy, and he understood the value of preserving the land. There was a very moving speech he gave at the White House once where he talked about his own childhood world and how his grandfather would ask him questions and give him an apple if he answered the question right. An apple then was a real treat.

And I remember that speech. He talked about the beauty of the land and how important it was to preserve it and save it in the future. And as a member of the co-op,

and the fellow who engineered the co-op, or helped improve the co-op at Johnson City, he knew the need for electric power to make the land flourish, to bring water to the Hill Country and the lights--as they say, "He brought us the lights in the Hill Country," the people said when he brought them power.

I think that essentially that Lyndon Johnson was an environmentalist because he was a product of the land. A rancher, he loved the beauty of Texas. He did talk to us frequently of the importance of preserving the land. I don't remember much in specifics of him talking about environment or clean air and water.

I think those pens and the legislation that was passed had a lot to do with the environment. When I--

G: Clean Air Act--

D: In the 1964-65-66 period, you have to understand, the thrust of everything he was doing was in the War on Poverty, Appalachia, and Vietnam. Saying that every kid in America who is educable ought to be able to get an education. If he couldn't afford it, if he could be educated, the government ought to find some way to provide an education. Find jobs for people, and that's how the Job Corps got going and that's how he promoted these programs, so he concentrated primarily on the meat and potatoes. And while I think environment was a part of his life, I don't remember any specific speeches on the environment. There may have well been, but I don't remember them. But I remember Lyndon Johnson going to Appalachia, sitting on the front porch of a ramshackle old house talking to a sharecropper who had no teeth, whose wife was just in the barest of what you could call civilized clothing and his children were in rags. And Lyndon

Johnson went down to this place. I remember him sitting on the stoop of this broken-down front porch talking to this man about his efforts to survive. LBJ took us to Appalachia. He showed us the worst parts of America deliberately. He sought to get the country involved in the War on Poverty.

Lyndon Johnson was not the president you wanted to cover if you had designs on living well and high. After John Kennedy, who traveled to some of the more regal places of the world and then getting on board with Lyndon Johnson, you didn't find yourself at Palm Beach very often. You either were in Johnson City, which wasn't bad; I mean it was reasonable living, but Kennedy had a way of traveling to Palm Springs, California, or Palm Beach, Florida. He knew the best watering holes, Hyannis Port. And the best we could get out of Lyndon Johnson was probably Johnson City and Austin, Texas. That's not a put-down. I loved both of them. But it wasn't the same anymore, because he was drawing attention to the fact that he was a hard worker and he didn't go to fancy places. He stayed close to the Ranch. He loved his Pedernales. He loved to take you to the graveyard, to the family graveyard. But he didn't necessarily take you other places, unless he had a meeting somewhere, I suppose. So we saw a lot of Appalachia. We heard a lot about poverty and we heard a lot about bringing industry to these areas and educating kids, so you went to college campuses, or you went to run-down areas in the country so you'd focus on it. He knew the cameras followed the president and if the cameras followed him, they would get pictures of some of this horror that existed in our midst, and that was his idea--that's why I say he was damn good on television. He knew its impact--or knew its potential.

G: He understood--

D: He knew it. Oh, he knew it. And it's a shame that--I don't say he didn't do a good job. I think he'd have done a better job. He didn't have any big-time media experts at the White House either, which--you know, now there's a whole new school, a whole industry has grown up: media, television experts who pose the president and pick the spots for pictures. President Johnson didn't have that kind--he was the old--there was a transition, I suppose, of going from the old form of running the White House press office to the new form, which now involves television doctors and that sort of thing.

But Johnson knew a good picture. As a matter of fact, he was always posing his pictures, remember? He was always the arranger in the East Room when they had a group of people. He would be arranging where everybody stood.

G: Really?

D: Oh, yes. "You stand here. You stand there. Congressman, you stand over there." He would get in and start telling the cameraman, [Yoichi] Okamoto, where to arrange everybody so they'd get their picture taken.

G: He did this all the time?

D: Well, all the time. Yes. Oh, yes. "You stand over here." He knew the value of pictures. And he knew the value of television, by asking for the networks to place those television crews in the White House almost around the clock, until midnight or something. Every night he'd have the television crew at the White House theater, and the networks paid for it. And a couple of times, he did go on the air. There were no early lids for the press at the White House. You didn't go home at five o'clock with Lyndon Johnson. You never

knew when you where going to go home with Lyndon Johnson; because he worked late, so everybody else worked late.

The focus of 1965--of course, he'd now been elected in his own right and the focus now was to get some of the things done. And that war started to intrude and intrude in a bigger way throughout the course of his presidency. I don't think in his wildest dreams that Lyndon Johnson--even though the Pentagon Papers show there was a game plan for what we had to do in Vietnam in terms of ground forces and that sort of thing--I don't think that in his wildest dreams he ever believed that his presidency would come to a close the way it did, or that Vietnam would mushroom the way it had.

And it's my feeling that while you know he's responsible for a lot of what went on, because he was the president, he got some bum advice. And he sometimes told us that he didn't know where to turn for advice. There were many times when he seemed frustrated in private sessions with reporters where he said, "I'm trying the get the best advice available to me. Where do I go if I don't go to someone who's come out of West Point and spent most of his life in the military? Is there somebody smarter than Bob McNamara? If there is, where is he?"

And these requests were coming out of Vietnam, just one, you know, one more battalion, one more this or one more that, and we'll see the light at the end of tunnel. And more and more the domestic programs were starting to suffer by some of this stuff. But I found him still to be pretty much of an optimist openly, even though now we know that he was tormented by the war privately. I think that he tried to put on a good show.

G: Do you think he had a sense that he was following a middle course?

D: I think so.

G: That he feared a greater escalation--

D: Well, there were those who asked for greater escalation and, you know, nuke 'em, bomb them back to the Stone Age. There was that aspect of it in 1964-65. In the Goldwater-Johnson campaign in 1964, that was one of the reasons why people voted for Lyndon Johnson, [that] they thought he was the more restrained of the two. At least that was the picture that was presented. And he tried to offer the middle course between doing nothing and doing too much. And the middle course was a reasoned response and they were hoping that Ho Chi Minh would say, "Okay, we'll stop." And Lyndon Johnson was trying to find out what it was Ho Chi Minh wanted. What was his price? He just couldn't figure Ho Chi Minh out, because Ho Chi Minh was prepared to take devastating losses. It's pretty much the same now in the Middle East to some extent. You have a dictator, Saddam Hussein, we're up against, who figures what have I got to lose if all these powers go against me? I might as well; I'll use everything I got. What have I got to lose? Unless he settles for negotiations, unless something scares him.

In Vietnam, the situation was somewhat similar in a sense. It was a Third World country. But I think that Ho Chi Minh felt that American public opinion was turning and if he could hold out, he might be able to get something out of it, which eventually happened, because public opinion did turn in this country.

I watched the President, I think, as most reporters did, on a--I don't want to say like a psychiatrist, but we saw him almost every day, which is unusual to some extent. In those days, anyway, presidents were not seen every day; presidents didn't go on television

every day. But Johnson liked to have pictures of what he was doing. Johnson was pretty open and, as you know, that first two or three years in the White House, he was here, there and everywhere. He loved to send pictures out to people of all the activities. So we saw a lot of him, probably--I've said this before--probably to his detriment. He got so familiar with the press that I think it probably hurt him in the end. He didn't understand the relationship. He thought that because he had interviewed sometime with someone and tried to explain his policies, that it would be easier, but it wasn't always true. And I do think, getting back to my original point, that he was pretty darn good in his handling of questions in the press and his way of doing it. It's just that he came across [as] insincere to some people and I don't know why that was. Maybe he was trying too hard. But he knew the power of the media. No question in my mind about that.

G: He did bring on Bob Kintner--

D: Yes.

G: --with the objective of helping him project on television. Did you get a sense of how, whether Kintner helped at all?

D: Well, I don't remember--I remember Kintner being there, but that was a different school of journalism, too. Kintner was not a show producer in the sense of producing things. I think Kintner might have been more substantive than today's--today's producers work on imaging. And I don't think they worked so much on the imaging then. Kintner was an adviser. He had medial and political savvy. They worked on substance of the speeches and that sort of thing.

Kintner might have told the President he was on too much, that he was too visible.

There was a period there where Johnson was on the air a lot in prime time and I think some of the American people felt they were seeing too much of him in that period. He did know the value of the evening time period, because he's the first president who had the prime-time State of the Union addresses. Usually, in the old days, the State of the Union addresses were held at noon, when you didn't have a very large television audience. Johnson moved it into the 9:00 p.m. period, when you could get the larger audience, because he felt the American people really ought to know what's going on with their government and their budget. He's the first president that drew the attention of the average guy to the budget, with his shenanigans over "Am I going to break a hundred billion [dollars] or am I not going to break a hundred billion," and that whole period in 1964. And he finally came in at $99.6 [billion] or something like that. The suspense--

G: $97.9 billion. Why do you think he did that?

D: I think he was trying to show how frugal he was. He wanted to show that he was going to be a responsible administrator of the economic resources, and I think he was having some fun, too. Republicans always claim that they were the people who watch the public's money. LBJ had large, big programs he wanted to pass. He really was very good at leading us down this path. We should have known he was going to come in under a hundred billion, because he made such a big deal out of it. He was very proud of that achievement. Of course, it came back to haunt him later, because then he went over it when the Vietnam thing got to be a problem.

They also changed the way budgets were put together that period, too, in fairness to him. I think the social security budget got involved with the regular budget. They had

an administrative budget, another kind of budget. He tried to clarify it. But he is the first president that I remember in my thirty years in Washington who drew so much attention--he was the first to focus so strongly on it. We get it now, but in those days, rarely did you spend as much time in a television news story on a budget as you did under Lyndon Johnson. He talked budget a lot.

C: Why do you think that was?

D: I think it was because of his Hill background. He knew it. He knew it better than most people in Congress knew it. He knew numbers and dollars. He'd tick them off on you. He knew every item on that budget. One thing he did read was the budget. It was remarkable what he knew about what was in that budget. How much was here, and how much was there and how much you're spending on--

Once he itemized the air force budget for the press, sitting there talking to him; he ran down some numbers on the air force budget. So he knew the business. A lot of presidents come to office without knowing it.

LBJ was a very skilled administrator regarding legislative activity, which is the budget. Most of what Congress does is budget-related. I mean, I'm in government now and I have never--I spend most of my time on budgeting!

C: The business of suggesting that the budget would be a $104 billion, $105 billion, whatever, and then at the last minute, bringing it in at $97.9 billion--do you think that this contributed to the credibility gap?

D: It did after a while, and after a while--

G: Describe that.

D: That's right. Well, I think that because there was such a build-up, he knew all along he was going to hold that thing under a hundred billion.

G: Now how do you know that?

D: Well, we just felt that we knew. I think word has come out since. I think that we found out afterwards that they pretty much had it all together and he knew pretty much where he was heading.

G: He never said later to you, "I really tricked you guys"?

D: Oh, no. I don't think so. No, I don't remember that. I just know that we all played this game of how difficult it was, the President's working every night. As a matter of fact, he turned the lights out at the White House because he's trying to save money and all that to keep this budget down. And he's asked everybody to be frugal. He built the suspense. And we don't think--the President's not sure he can do it. His advisers are not sure, but they're hoping and they're doing everything they can, and we'll have to wait to see. And then of course when the budget figures came out, he was under a hundred billion and it was a headline and it was all over television.

That's probably the first time television ever made so much out of a budget. But later on there were stories about the arithmetic and that sort of thing, and people felt that he hurt himself, because the next budget, I believe, was over the hundred billion; he had to go over the amount, and that always hurts, when you set this marker and you're not going to go beyond it and suddenly you have to. It's just like Bush: "Read my lips."

G: What do you think caused the credibility gap?

D: Well, I've always felt--I think that there was a tendency to exaggerate. But I was never

convinced that Lyndon Johnson was the only president who had a credibility gap. You just had a different word for it. When I came to town, there was this criticism of--I came here in the fading hours of the Eisenhower Administration, late 1959, early 1960. Eisenhower was facing his last year in office and there were these stories about news management, that Eisenhower was managing the news; Jim Hagerty, his press secretary, was managing the news. Things were not quite what the White House was saying, which is to some extent the same thing, except Eisenhower did not have the war. So then you have the credibility gap. I'm trying to recall a definition of credibility gap, the perception of things as they are against what you're being told they are. Now they never said that the President's lying, but the credibility gap really left it unsaid. But I think all presidents have had to deal with the public and offer hope and say, I hope to get from point A to point B, and not have a problem. Maybe Johnson bulldozed the gap a little wider during his time. But I don't think he was the only one that had a credibility problem. We've had several presidents since who've had similar problems with credibility.

He did have this tendency to embellish. The great story about his great-grand daddy at the Alamo that he told--I'm sure you've heard the story--when he was in Korea. Well, I happen to have a tape of him saying it. I'm the only one who's got a tape of that.

G: Really?

D: He said it at Camp Stanley up near the thirty-eighth parallel on one of his visits to Korea. And I was a pool reporter and I had a tape recorder with me. And I recorded everything that he said on that trip. And it was a beautiful speech, if you hear the whole speech. He was talking to young men in the chow hall at Camp Stanley. These are young soldiers

facing the North Koreans in late 1960 [1966]. The world was not as peaceful as it is today in terms of the East and West, or Cold War, and the President said, "Old men like me send young men like you to die throughout history." That's what he said. "It's up to us to try to keep the peace," and then he talked about war and courage and I think at that point he said, "My granddaddy was at the Alamo." And of course there are some historians among the press corps and there wasn't much else to write about that day, and they latched onto that. The White House had a devil of a time explaining that--at first it was "misspoken," I think, then somebody came out and said no, he did have a relative at San Jacinto. And then there was that wonderful story Bill Moyers made up, that his granddaddy was at the Alamo; the Alamo Hotel. You've heard the story, I'm sure. But--oh, LBJ had a tendency to exaggerate. I never considered that a capital crime.

G: Did he deny that he'd said it?

D: Yes, originally they did deny it until they found out there was an available transcript--

G: That you had a tape--

D: And it was on tape. I've got a bunch of marvelous speeches that he's made like that and I've kept them. I've got them in a box. I haven't listened to them since he delivered them, I do have the Camp Stanley tape.

[Interruption]

We're jumping all over the place. We went to Australia, and the Australians are something like Texans. To LBJ, anyway, they were. And of course he'd spent some time in Australia when he was in Sydney or Melbourne. A prominent Australian woman--when he was in the navy--invited him and other servicemen to dinner and got to

know LBJ pretty well. She was still alive when we went there and he visited her at the house where he, as a young navy officer, had dinner with this woman and her family. She and the Johnsons kept in touch over the years.

And when we were going to the airport, leaving Australia, Johnson stopped wherever there was a crowd. They were lining in the streets--there was a tremendous turnout. And he stopped at almost every street corner, got out of the car, got onto the trunk. He had a little microphone that he talked into, like a lavalier mike, that went through the loudspeakers built into the car. His limousine was the first outfitted with a loudspeaker system so he could talk to crowds on his way in and out of town.

On this occasion he tried it from inside the car and it wouldn't work. The air conditioning got all screwed up. Confetti got in the air conditioner ducts. So he got out and sat out on the trunk. And he delivered all these little speeches. And I remember one of the themes was that "there we were, the Aussies and the Americans, against the Japs." Now, some of the protocol people were a little worried, the late 1960s, referring to the Japanese as "Japs." But he did. "And there we were, in the Owen Stanley Range." You get me? Talking about the Owen Stanley Range. "There the Japanese were, coming over the Owen Stanley Range, and here we were, the Americans and the Aussies, fighting this war." And I've got those speeches. They're on a piece of tape somewhere in this box I've got. You're welcome to listen to them.

G: Anything else on the Australian part to the trip?

D: Well, the Australian part of the trip was most interesting, colorful. I think we're flying--you'd have to correct me--we were flying from either Melbourne to Sydney or

Sydney to Melbourne. You've heard the story on *Air Force One,* where I was a member of the pool and Prime Minister [Harold] Holt and his wife were there, and the press was invited back in to President's cabin and had breakfast. And it was bacon and eggs or ham and eggs. And Mrs. Holt was sitting just across from the President and Prime Minister Holt and the rest of us were around the table. The President ate all of his ham and eggs and all that, and then he suddenly reached across with his fork and started eating Mrs. Holt's ham and eggs. Have you heard this? Yes, he did. They were so good! And she was a little struck by this thing, but he ate her--I think he ate the bacon. I think he ate the bacon off her plate, all the while carrying on an animated conversation with all of us, the Prime Minister, Mrs. Holt, Mrs. Johnson, the reporters. He never skipped a beat. (Laughter)

I remember that he liked Holt. He thought Holt was a lot like he was. Outgoing, exuberant, very vigorous guy, and popular, I think, within his own country at the time. And Johnson had this fondness for the Australians because of World War II and also because they did support us in Vietnam. But I think it was one of the high points of his trip because it was a place that the President could go where he could be welcomed, cheered by people. That was 1967, I believe. And then of course we had to go back; within a month or so Holt drowned and we went back to his funeral. And it was from his funeral that we then went--

G: Around the world.

D: --around the world, and Hugh Sidey of *Time* called him "Lyndon B. Magellan," which he never forgave Hugh for. I'm told he never forgave--he didn't like that article. It was a

kind of a cute article.

G: Let's get back to the credibility gap. Did the Bobby Baker investigation and the White House efforts to put distance between the Baker-LBJ relationship contribute the credibility gap?

D: Yes. There's no question that the association with Bobby Baker was a serious blow to the presidency of Lyndon Johnson.

G: Really? And that was very early on.

D: Yes. That was very early on and Baker went to jail. While the White House tried to distance itself from Bobby Baker during that whole investigation and trial and that sort of thing, it was very difficult to do because everybody felt in town that Bobby Baker was a *protégé* of Lyndon Johnson's. And I think the President was deeply hurt politically by that, even though it was short term. No question about it. LBJ did go as vice president to the Carousel Motel--which Bobby Baker owned--for the grand opening and they reprinted pictures of that in the press all during the Baker trial and in discussions of it. Anytime you have someone like that who was associated with a president, it's going to make news, and I think the President was hurt by that.

Now on Vietnam, he may have had a game plan for 500,000 troops from the very beginning. We all know that there were plans at the Pentagon for a larger land force in Vietnam than he told the American people about. That came to hurt him. Even though, in defense of what they did, the administration was saying, "Well, you can't be in the White House without having any contingency plans. We should have been impeached if we didn't have some plan for sending more troops there in case the war required it." But I

think all of that came home; the chickens came home to roost. And all this razzle-dazzle over the budget; Bobby Baker--all this had a cumulative effect and people began to think of LBJ as the wheeler-dealer. And his critics certainly helped to make sure that image was emblazoned wherever they could, and he had to spend some time at his news conferences arguing against it. Looking back now, I think the Bobby Baker episode became a footnote by the end of the LBJ presidency.

LBJ was a very convincing guy, you know. He could go up on the Hill and meet with congressmen, or meet them at the White House, and he could cajole and convince, He was very good at servicing the accounts, as they say in the broadcast business. He knew the weak spots of a congressman. He knew when he could call on them for help and he knew when he couldn't.

The story around town was that Johnson, having been a successful parliamentarian, knew when a congressmen could be supportive and when he couldn't, and he would give them a pass. If he knew a congressman faced certain defeat by voting for him on something, then he would be the first to say, "I understand this is a tough one for you, but next time around I'm going to need your help." So he understood that game.

G: In the summer of 1965 George Reedy was replaced by Bill Moyers as press secretary, is that right? Did this change--

D: Yes, it changed. Moyers' designation as press secretary changed a lot in the White House because George Reedy was an extremely cautious person. George Reedy really was a journalist, and as a journalist he would attribute--he would try to have a two-source rule, in a sense. He was very careful about the use of his words. I don't think George Reedy

ever made a mistake in the use of words, because he had been with UPI many years before--I believe it was UPI--and he did not see himself as a policy maker. He saw himself as a press secretary, although he knew what was going on. He had a long relationship with Lyndon Johnson, to some extent, a fearful one. Whereas with Bill Moyers you had someone who was bright and younger and feisty, who was a newcomer, to some extent, in Washington; who felt that he had the President's confidence. And so I think you had a feeling that there were times when Bill Moyers held a press briefing and if we had a question and he didn't--if Bill Moyers did not have an answer from the Oval Office, he would go ahead and give you one. I don't think George Reedy ever did that. I don't think that George ever made policy in the press office, at the press briefing, and I think Bill Moyers did.

G: Any examples that you can cite?

D: I can't remember specific ones, but I think Moyers has alluded to the fact that from time to time he would put words in the President's mouth on a policy. I'm not sure he was wrong. The President may have always felt the way Moyers said he felt. I don't know what happened after Moyers said it.

But I do know we all had the feeling that Moyers could speak for the President in a way, that he could talk policy, whereas I think with George that he would not. George was more of a--I think George answered questions quite well and was cautious, but I don't think he took the extra step.

G: Was Reedy more cautious around the President than Moyers was, or was there a difference between them? You've mentioned the self-confidence.

D: I think so. Reedy was always quiet around the President. When we were with the President, generally Reedy would stand behind the group; he would stand at the back of the group.

On those long walks around the back of the White House, when the President used to take those walks, and hold those walking-talking news conferences, Reedy would bring up the rear. One reason he brought up the rear was he had bad feet. He had a terrible foot problem and he could not keep up with the pace, and sometimes the President would do that in 80-degree weather, 85-degree weather out, in August, you know. Whereas with Bill Moyers you always felt--in a group with the President, Moyers just generally would sometimes join in the conversation, join in some response or something like that.

Yes, I think that Moyers was bolder in public with the President than Reedy was. I think Reedy saw his role in a different way from Moyers. Moyers was a policy maker in that administration, as well as a press secretary. And while I think LBJ probably heeded George Reedy's advice, Reedy never saw himself as a policy maker. He saw himself as the press secretary.

G: How did it change when George Christian took over?

D: Well, there again, you had a--I think that George Christian had played both roles. But George Christian was far more careful about his image as a policy maker. I think, looking back, that George probably had the President's ear on a lot of things, but he never led you to believe that. He was as close as Reedy was to the President. George Christian was a gentleman, discreet, totally professional.

I don't think George ever took credit, saying, "I gave the President this idea." Although I think that he probably did play that role. And I remember George saying--I don't know whether he told me this in private or whether he told us this in that room; I think it might have been a private conversation--he said that he had a session with Ron Ziegler, who was the incoming press secretary to Richard Nixon. And Ziegler asked him if he had any advice, in being a press secretary to a president. And Christian said, "I told him, you go in the Oval Office any time something is going on and make him throw you out." Meaning, if you're not invited, go anyway. You're the press secretary. You can't be a press secretary to a president unless you know everything that's going on. If they keep you out of the Oval Office, don't take the job. "Make them throw you out." And he said, "I found that to be useful. Whenever I heard the President was having a meeting, I just walked in and sat down. I might not have been invited, but I walked in and sat down. No one threw me out, but I couldn't be an effective press secretary unless I knew everything." And I do believe that George Christian offered some advice to the President, but I don't think he ever bragged about it. I mean, with Moyers, we just had the sense that he had a different role at the White House before he was press secretary, which was in more of a policy role. And I think that with Christian you had a quieter guy, working behind the scenes, but I think Johnson trusted his judgment. Also, Christian had lines to some of the old guard in Texas and that sort of thing.

G: John Connally and--

D: John Connally and that group. And Moyers' lines went, when once he came to Washington, well, a lot of those lines were with the Kennedy family.

Did Moyers come to the White House after the Peace Corps? I trying to--

G: Yes.

D: He was over at the Peace Corps for a while.

G: And then, when the assassination occurred, he--

D: Then he moved over to the White House. That's right.

G: There have been some criticisms that Moyers was actually a press secretary for Bill Moyers; that he really hyped his own--

D: Well, he, yes--I wouldn't go that far. I do think that he--I can't believe he was unaware of the visibility of that office, the office of the press secretary. He became quite a visible guy and he's a very bright guy.

You know, he writes meticulous notes. If you look at one of his note pads, he writes in the tiniest--his note pads are written in the tiniest--I think they were printed letters. And that's a sign of a very organized mind. And I saw his note pads several times and it was amazing what he packed into a note pad, how small the print was and how neat it was.

He had a sense of the history of that office and he wrote these things to himself. And he did get to be a high-visibility guy with the press. He endeared himself to the press pretty much. And toward the end, of course, he did pretty well at getting a job at *Newsday* in New York as a journalist. And here was a guy who had been to a Baptist seminary. He was an ordained minister, wasn't he?

G: Yes. I guess the question really goes to the matter of whether Bill Moyers was promoting his own image with the press at LBJ's expense.

D: Well, there was some criticism of that. There were a lot of people who felt that was true.

G: Did you sense it as a member of the working press?

D: I never wrote about it because I never wrote that kind of a--I never did a profile piece. But I suppose looking back--I can't say that he did it at the expense of the President. I think whatever he did was consciously done to assist the President. I think whatever he did probably was done to serve both purposes.

But he was perfectly defensible of the President--

G: He was?

D: At the briefings that we went to and where questions came up about policies and stuff, I don't recall any of it where Bill Moyers dropped the ball and didn't give a vigorous defense of administration policy. I don't remember that. Now privately there may have been other things going on. There was a suspicion that Bill Moyers was working both sides of the street, with Bobby Kennedy on the one side and the Johnson people on the other. But in the handling of his public responsibilities, I felt that--

G: Okay.

D: --he did okay.

G: Anything else on LBJ and his press secretaries?

D: Well, I think it was probably tough to be a Lyndon Johnson press secretary. He was very demanding. He had his own ideas about the press and coverage. He was very big on the Sunday newspaper. This was the old school.

When he was majority leader, they tell me, he would meet with the reporters on Saturday mornings in the well of the Senate, where the reporters could sit and talk to him

as majority leader and he would tell them what he was going to do in the way of strategy for legislation and working with President Eisenhower. [He was] looking for that Sunday-morning piece in the Sunday papers. He felt the Sunday papers were widely read. I'm not so sure that was true in the 1960s; certainly I don't think it's that true today. I think people do read the Sunday papers, but not the way they used to. Television has changed a lot in this country.

And so he would work for the Sunday papers. He'd hold those Saturday-morning news conferences in the office, around his desk, not for television. But he was looking for those Sunday paper stories. And quite often he would invite reporters in for interviews, looking for a Sunday piece. In that sense, I think, his relationship with his press secretaries was of the kind where he was telling them what to do.

Also, LBJ read the transcripts of the White House press briefings. There were the White House noon briefings that George Christian and George Reedy and Bill Moyers held, and LBJ would get the transcript of the things. The secretaries in the press office would note the reporter's name next to the question so the President knew who asked the questions at those briefings.

There was a suspicion that Lyndon had a line from the press secretary's office to his own office where he could listen in on the briefings. And I'm told by a person who worked in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, who wired that room, that that wasn't the case, that Lyndon did not have a line. There was a microphone in the ceiling or in the wall in the press secretary's office, but he said that was for internal press secretary use and did not go to the President's office.

But the President would get these reports after a briefing. He'd get the question that was asked of George Reedy or George Christian, plus the name of the reporter. So the next time the President saw you, if you [had] asked a real crappy question at one of those briefings, he might say something to you about it. And so the suspicion would be, well, he must be listening; he's monitoring George Reedy's briefings.

G: Did that ever happen to you?

D: Yes, it did happen to me, as a matter of fact.

G: Give me an example.

D: I don't know if I told you this story about my--I had an ureteral stone. It's like a kidney stone, but it went away. I'll try to make this fast as I can.

We went to Guam with the President to meet with President [Nguyen Van] Thieu and [Nguyen Cao] Ky in 1967. It was a summit conference. The war wasn't going well. The President was going to read the riot act to these two guys in South Vietnam and try to get some resolution of the war, make it go better or whatever. And LBJ had a summit in Guam and, as you know, Lyndon Johnson never liked to rest while he was traveling. He wanted to go quickly from point A to point B. He was not one, even though he had to stop in Honolulu, to lay over in Honolulu for a day or so and rest up and then make the second leg of the trip to Guam. He wanted to do it in one fell swoop.

And so we left Washington, flew to Honolulu. Bam! They refuel the airplanes. We're off again for Guam. Everybody's tired. You get to Guam. It's terrible. It's humid. It's raining every twenty seconds. They've got these monsoons that are awful. He's got to go into a parade, because the people in Guam want to see the President of the United

States. After all, they claim they're the first part of the United States to see the sunrise. "The sun rises first in Guam" is the slogan they have out there.

So we get out to Guam and everybody has traveled nonstop virtually from Washington, except for refueling. Get to Guam. He holds these meetings with Thieu and Ky. They last a day or less. Back on the airplane. Back to Washington. No layover. Come back into Washington. Everybody's dragging. It's seven or eight o'clock in the morning. We were gone all a total of four days or three days, most of it in airplanes.

And we get back to the White House and, of course, everybody sees the President that morning and he looks awful and tired. And his voice is raspy. And at the briefing that day I said, "George, the President sounded tired and weary and didn't seem to be well," [or] words to that effect. "Does he have a cold? His voice is raspy." And he said, "No. The President's okay." I said, "Well, he didn't look well to a lot of us. When he got off the plane, he looked tired. He's conducting these meetings and didn't get any sleep." I really laid it on about the President's health. "The President's fine," says George Christian. "He's okay, no problems."

And the briefing ended and I went to lunch with Frank Reynolds of ABC News at our usual little hangout not far from the White House. And during lunch I got this--this extraordinary pain in my side. It was unbelievable. I've never had any pain like that. It just doubled me up. Just piercing pain. And it went on, then it went away; it went on. I finally said to Frank Reynolds, "I think I'm going to go home!" I had been up; I had not been to sleep for days. We just came back from Guam. "I think I'm going to go on home and get some rest." And I started home and I get the pain again and I got home and I said

to my wife, "This is something I've never had before. You better call our doctor and tell him what I'm getting." And the doctor said, "I'll meet you at George Washington Hospital in an hour," a half hour or something, "once you get to the hospital."

So I headed to GW from my home out in North Bethesda. And they admitted me to the hospital. They admitted me to the hospital for what they call a ureteral stone. It's a little--it's a like a kidney stone that hasn't--it's left the kidney and is moving out, but it's still in a little tube you've got, and it was *killing* me. And they said they're going to keep me overnight. And I didn't want to stay overnight, but I had to. They said, "No, you just have to stay here until this thing goes away."

So I guess it was shortly after dinner, on that same night, after the nurses came and saw me, they brought me a letter that was hand-delivered to the George Washington University Hospital by a White House messenger. And it said, "Dear Sid: I understand that you're not feeling well. I just want you to know that I'm fine. I don't have a cold. I'm not tired. I'm not worn out." And it went on and on and on. It repeated all these questions I had asked at the briefing. And he found out I was in the hospital and he found this as a wonderful way to needle me, that he was fine and I was sick. So he sent this thing over and then, there's this hand--and it was typed and it had his--it was "LBJ" and then at the bottom he wrote in his own handwriting, as I recall, "Get well soon and hurry back." Something like that. So yes, obviously he had read the press briefing transcript. We thought at first he was listening in on that. But that was one of my personal Lyndon Johnson touches.

See, I think in my coverage of Johnson, when you're talking to a television or

radio reporter you don't--we did not write long, comprehensive reports on the legislation. There's just no time in television for it. I do remember the major pieces of legislation that he passed, the civil rights bills and that sort of thing, and television appearances. The mood changes as the war was not going well. And the isolation.

G: Did he become more isolated?

D: Oh, yes. Yes. He was more available early on than he was in later days. He started finding out that sometimes familiarity--familiarity with the press, like familiarity in the military, they say, breeds contempt. You got to be very careful. The lines can become blurred and there were some reporters, myself included, who might have been invited for a weekend--not a weekend, but let's say we were in Texas at the Ranch with the President, covering the President in Austin, he was at the Ranch, where he invited you for a boat ride with five or six other reporters and maybe their families.

And he was just wonderful and you didn't talk shop. It was a wonderful social occasion. And maybe a week later the President held a news conference, and you stood up there and now you're no longer this person who was invited on a social occasion to meet with the President. You were now back to being a reporter and so you asked the questions that have to be asked. Some of those at that time were very tough questions on how the war was being prosecuted. And I'm sure there was a great deal of hurt on the part of the President, to see some of these people that he had gotten to know and trust and then they get up and they asked these tough, probing questions about where are you headed? Why is your popularity dropping? You know, why are you sending so many more troops and the country doesn't want that? This became a tough period for him and I

think that relationship started to change, and there was less access on the part of some of the reporters to the President that he had seen before.

I don't think he was totally isolated. I know that in George Reedy's book, he felt that--not necessarily Lyndon Johnson, but most presidents become isolated by their staffs. I think that's probably true. But I did get to see the President before he left the White House. I had asked for an interview with him and I got an interview in November, I think, before--1969.

G: 1968.

D: 1968, before he left office. Sat with him and talked about the war, whether he could have-if he had run in 1968, would he have won.

G: What did he say?

D: He said yes, I think he--yes.

G: Did he say why he thought he would have won?

D: He gave me reason to believe that there were some polls. There were some samplings that he was aware of. He felt the country was more hawkish than most people felt it was. And I think the result of 1968, with Richard Nixon defeating Hubert Humphrey--Nixon was far more a hawk; he was far more a hawk on the war than Hubert Humphrey was.

But I remember saying to him, in that session--George Christian was in the room and it was on a Saturday. He liked to do a lot of interviews on Saturdays. He wore a sport jacket; he had a brown checked jacket on, as I recall, and a pair of brown slacks. And he liked those Saturday sessions.

I remember sitting on the sofa, facing him, and I said, "Mr. President, there were

some days in the time that you've been president when you really woke up in the morning and you had so many problems that you really didn't want to go to work. You really didn't want to go to the office." And he looked at me with those laser eyes, and he didn't answer me. He just looked at me. And George Christian said, "You mean challenges, not problems." I said, "Challenges, Mr. President." And he answered my question, "No." But he was not going to accept my word that they were problems. He saw them as challenges. It's interesting that George interjected the word--

G: Knew what to--

D: I saw him not long before--I guess it was a year before he died, I'm not sure. I went down and spent a day with him at the Ranch. Didn't expect it to turn into a day. I was told I couldn't see him, but I went down there anyway and he saw me.

But getting back to the whole thing on the media, which is where I come in, because that is something I've studied since I left covering the White House and being a reporter. I've watched the evolution of television and the presidency. And when I say I couldn't be comprehensive, compared to what we do now, we were very comprehensive then. Today, sound bites are nine seconds. Nine seconds is considered a long piece of sound for the president or anyone else on a television news story. In radio, I could do a one-and-a-half to two- or three-minute piece on a presidential speech. Today they do it in twenty seconds limit, most radio stations. A television piece today is a minute and fifteen at most. You could do longer stories than that during the Vietnam War. When I covered the White House you could run longer than that. Today the attention span of the American people seems to be much shorter, and television has been forced to cut its

substance, using shorter stories.

You know, it's interesting. What Johnson did with the War on Poverty was to take the whole country with him to where it hadn't been before. LBJ took America out of Main Street, out of New York City and went to Appalachia. He went down to the deepest South Carolina areas. He went to New Orleans. And during the campaign of 1964, he stopped his car in this poor black area so that the people could get a look at the little children.

He knew that wherever he stopped the cameras would show pictures. He was pretty sharp in knowing the power of television. Today they hire people at the White House to do that. But back then they didn't have anybody who was specially designated to be a television doctor. As I recall, they had people in the White House press office who were first [rate] in cutting tape and that sort of thing, and knew a lot about how to put a picture together, but they didn't have the political savvy that went with the picture, which is what they have today, and people who are in business to do that sort of thing. LBJ was ahead of his time in understanding the impact of television on public policy. He knew his travels to Appalachia would dramatize the problems of poverty. He was the first president to deliver State of the Union addresses in prime time and to hold prime-time news conferences in the East Room to attract larger audiences.

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