INTERVIEWEE: WILLARD DEASON (Tape 2)

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

April 11, 1969; Washington, D. C.

F: This is an interview with Mr. Willard Deason, Commissioner of the Interstate Commerce Commission, in his office in Washington, D. C., on April 11, 1969, and the interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

Bill, I think we will dispense with formalities and get on with first names--

D: All right, that's fine, Joe.

F: --and not be too pretentious here. Tell us very briefly something of your own background, where you're from; run over rather rapidly what all you did up to the time that you came to Washington and the Interstate Commerce Commission.

D: I was born in Stockdale, Texas, in Wilson County just east of San Antonio; lived on a farm until I was eighteen or twenty years old. I became a country rural school teacher.

F: Did you go from high school into school teaching?

D: Yes, I did, by taking what was known then as the state examination; went through a little private tutoring in Stockdale after I finished high school. And with this summer tutoring I was able to pass the examination for the teacher's certificate. And I taught four years in the rural schools, and the county school superintendent said, "Well, if you're going to go any further, boy, you'd better get yourself a degree."

So I went to San Marcos and enrolled and following his advice stayed there until I got my degree. I taught school then for four more years in

San Antonio at Alamo Heights Junior High School. During those four years, I was going to night law school in San Antonio at the old San Antonio Public School of Law; it has now been merged into, I believe, St. Mary's University School of Law. It's no longer existent, and I think it merged into St. Mary's.

After getting my license to practice law, I quit the school teaching profession and went to Houston and worked for the Federal Land Bank as a junior attorney for about a year and a half; then moved to Austin to help my friend LBJ organize and initiate the National Youth Administration program in Texas. That was in the summer of 1935.

In '37 LBJ went to Congress and I stayed on in the NYA program until the war came along; in January of 1942 I went into the Navy. Spent four years in the Navy--

F: Where did you serve, incidentally?

D: Well, I served some time here in Washington; served some in New Orleans; I served some in the Atlantic and some in the Pacific. My last tour of duty was at Kwajalain in the Pacific; I was there when the Japanese surrender took place. And as quick as I could get passage, I came back to America; I had served my term and I had the number of points to get out.

F: I was on Kwajalain once very briefly while you were there; they sent me ashore to have a tooth looked at, and the dentist looked at it and he said, "Which way is your ship heading, boy?" I said, "I'm heading for the States," and he said, "Well, you'd be a lot happier if you waited till you got to the United States to get that tooth fixed."

D: Yes, I'll tell you. Facilities weren't too elaborate on Kwajalain; they really weren't. It was rather bleak duty, but healthy duty.

F: Right. Okay, after the war, what did you do?

D: I went back to Austin which by then I had adopted as my home, had lived there since 1935, and began working for Mrs. Johnson's radio station as a salesman, later became sales manager; worked for her for three years. And then in January of '49, I became the manager of radio station KVET, and stayed there for seventeen years, becoming ultimately the owner of it. But in 1965 I sold the station, and was unemployed for thirty days, then came to Washington and took the job that President Johnson had given me as a member of the Interstate Commerce Commission.

F: When did you first meet Lyndon Johnson?

D: I met him, I think, in early 1927--maybe April, 1927. We both enrolled in what was then called a short spring term at Southwest Texas State College.

F: Was it a first time for both of you?

D: I had been there one summer before, and he had been there one summer before, but not the same summer; we never knew one another. We both enrolled in the spring of '27.

My first encounter with him was a little bit unpleasant. We were taking a math course and I having been a teacher thought I knew all the answers, and he thought he knew some of the answers, too, and we got in a little dispute right in the classroom. I guess my feelings were more on edge than his; I kind of got in a huff and turned away from him. When the class was over I walked out ahead of him, he walked up and dropped his long arm down on my shoulder and said, "Now, that's nothing to be mad about. That's just all in the day's work. No use you and I being mad at one another, might as well be friends." And that did something to me. I saw then that I had met up with an unusual fellow, and we became fast friends after that little incident.

F: Did you room together when you were in San Marcos?

D: Well, off and on at times, not a long time. We are known as roommates, but actually we never roomed together very long at a time. I stayed most of the time at the Pirtle house where he had stayed at one time; and he stayed most of his time in the president's garage and at the Gates house. But we slept in the same bed a good many times and became known as roommates. And history has recorded us as roommates.

F: Were you in classes together?

D: Oh, yes, a good many classes together.

F: What kind of impression did he make on you as a fellow student?

D: Well, in the courses in which he was interested, which was history or English or public speaking, he was an outstanding student--the courses he was interested in; mathematics or science, as I recall, he took about what courses he had to, as I did, and he was just an average student there.

F: You had similar interests then in what courses you liked and what courses you didn't?

D: Yes, that's right.

F: Did you serve on the debating team with him?

D: No, I couldn't make it. He made it; his debating partner was a fellow named Elmer Graham; it was a good team, and it was a little too much competition for me.

F: Were you involved in any of the campus politics with him?

D: Oh, yes, there were a number of campus political activities that we were involved in.

F: He is supposed to have sort of overturned campus politics while he was there, at least the ruling group. Do you recall anything about that?

D: Oh, yes. There were no fraternities at the college as such; however, there was reputed to be a secret fraternity which was dominated by the athletes

of the school, and they had sort of surreptitiously dominated the school politics. LBJ and a few other campus leaders felt like that maybe that wasn't good for the college; that everybody needed some competition. So there was a group composed of some eight or nine that organized another secret fraternity and in order that I don't violate some vows I took some forty years ago, there are portions of it that I will not discuss. But it's pretty well history now, so I can discuss a lot of it without disobeying any of my boyhood vows I took at the time.

But we did, largely with the leadership of LBJ, Vernon Whiteside, Hollis Frazier, a few other fellows, give them some competition. We got most of the class officers and the charge of the college newspaper and of the college annual, things like that, and the student council for a year or two or three.

F: Was young Lyndon the prime mover in this?

D: Well, he was certainly one of the prime ones, yes, sir. I might relate one incident which will show you that even at the age of eighteen or nineteen he had some of the qualities which later came forward in his political career. I was nominated for president of the senior class against the incumbent, Dick Spinn, of Brenham who was a very popular student, a good student, athlete--backed by the athletes. But our group decided to give him competition, and they nominated me. The campaign went along and there were only, oh, I would say probably two hundred students in the senior class, so it wasn't too hard to count noses. And the night before the election, we counted noses and we were behind and were very discouraged, and gave up and quit; that is, all except LBJ. There was our group, there was the athletes' group, and then there were folks who belonged to neither group or really were not cognizent of either group

and could go either way. But there was a third group which we called the YMCA group. It was a rather coherent group of students on the campus. And they had been against us because Dick Spinn was also a member of the YMCA and a fine outstanding student. So there wasn't any reason why they shouldn't support him. But LBJ in his inimitable way said to himself, "Well, if I can change that group, it may change it. The rest of you may be going to bed, but I'm not."

So he started making rounds to the dormitories and buttonholing folks. And in his persuasive way somewhere between ten o'clock at night when we disbanded and voting time the next morning, he switched about twenty votes, and I won by a narrow margin.

F: Was his style of persuasion then just about the same as it became in his political life?

D: Yes, I think his greatest forte is to look a man in the eye and do a convincing job of selling him his viewpoint; he could do it then and he can still do it today.

F: Did he show any interest in athletics himself while he was in San Marcos; did he have time?

D: No. I think he went out for baseball, he had played some baseball at Johnson City High School; but the competition was pretty keen there and his interests actually lay in other lines. So maybe after one season of going out for baseball, he went in for other endeavors. Of course he was working, trying to pay his way through school, so he didn't have too much time for baseball practice. He never won a letter.

F: When you finished college, then you went to San Antonio?

D: That's correct. I started teaching school in San Antonio.

F: Now, did you stay in fairly close contact with him during that San Antonio period?

D: Yes. He went to Houston at the same time and started teaching, and we saw one another maybe once a month; I'd go to Houston and spend a weekend with him, or he'd come to San Antonio with his debating team and I would see him at that time. In the fall we went to what was known as the Teachers' Institute, and there was a week in which we had seminars for teachers; we would always be together there.

F: Did you have an idea then that teaching was only temporary; that he was going into politics?

D: I was not surprised when he moved out of teaching into his first political job.

F: How did he get that position with Congressman Kleberg? It was in his district, I think, the way the district was drawn then, but Kleberg came from two hundred miles away.

D: He was teaching school in Houston, and I believe his home county Blanco probably was in Congressman Dick Kleberg's district. But he was recommended to Dick Kleberg by two men who knew him intimately, and that was Welly Hopkins of Gonzales who Lyndon had helped win his seat in the State Senate--

F: I've interviewed him, incidentally.

D: --and by Senator A. J. Wirtz from Seguin who was one of Dick Kleberg's close political advisers, and who had known Lyndon since he was a boy. He had served in the Texas legislature with Lyndon's father and had known him--followed his career through San Marcos. So it was largely through Wirtz and Hopkins saying to Kleberg, "We're not trying to get you to give a young fellow a job; we're trying to get you the best man in your district to go to Washington with you." And on that basis Dick Kleberg called up and asked him, said, "I understand that you're just the man I need. My friends have told me, and I wish you would come down here to Corpus Christi

and let's have a little talk," and they did. In a few days LBJ was on his way to Washington and went to work for Dick Kleberg. They now call it administrative assistant; in those days it was called secretary--same job.

F: Did you ever see the secretary or administrative assistant in Washington during that period?

D: Yes, I made one trip up here and visited with him; stayed, of course, in the little apartment that he and Lady Bird lived in. They made room for me on the couch and I spent several nights in their home.

F: How did he seem to like his job?

D: Well, just like he liked any other job. He had a great interest and did everything with great gusto; he just thought he had the greatest job in Washington, being the secretary to the Congressman from his district. And he worked like it was the finest job that there was.

F: He and Congressman Kleberg then had a mutual respect for each other?

D: Yes, that's true, I am sure. Because he would come to Texas during the four or five years that he worked for Kleberg, and I would see him. He always had the highest regard and a great admiration for Mr. Kleberg. And I saw Mr. Kleberg a few times during that time, and he always spoke very highly of Lyndon. There have been stories of conflict between them; there was no conflict that I ever saw; nothing but mutual admiration and respect and really love.

F: Then you moved to Houston in there with the Federal Land Bank.

D: Well, no, I moved from the Federal Land Bank--

F: You moved to the NYA then?

D: Right. I went from teaching in San Antonio, yes, to Houston to the Federal Land Bank.

F: How did Mr.--

D: During that time that I was in Houston, Lyndon was in Washington with Mr. Kleberg. But when he got the NYA job and came back to Texas, then he asked me to leave the Federal Land Bank and come with him in the NYA.

F: How did he get the NYA job? He was pretty young to be a state director for an agency like that.

D: Well, really I don't know; I was not around and he never really discussed it with me. I've heard stories that Sam Rayburn recommended him; I've heard stories that Tom Connally recommended him; and I've heard stories that Maury Maverick recommended him. And I would guess they all did. But he was known, though, in Washington as an outstanding young man that got things done. So the National Youth Administration, I think, were looking for men of his caliber; probably the job gravitated to him as much as he gravitated to the job.

F: Tell me a little bit about those years on the NYA; I'm not revealing any confidence when I say that I've talked to some of the current Negro leaders who told me that back in the middle 1930's, they didn't know Lyndon Johnson from Adam, but they began to get word up here that there was one NYA director who wasn't like the others. As one Negro said to me, "He was looking after Negroes and poor folks," and that "most NYA people weren't doing that." So they put an eye on him in those days and started watching what he was doing. So I'd be very interested in your mutual experiences with him.

D: I would say that was a fair statement coming from the Negro people, because certainly when we set up the program--

F: What surprised them, of course, was that it was coming out of Texas particularly, you know.

D: Yes, but what I started to say, we had Negro projects--one of the earliest ones was at Prairie View College, and Dr. Banks who was the president of

the college was on our state advisory board; there were, I think, seven people on the state advisory board, and he was one of the advisers.

There were also projects at Bishop College, and the other college over at Marshall--I can't think of the name.

F: Wiley?

D: Wiley College. And then on what we called the Work Project Program all over the State, Negro boys, white boys, Mexican boys, and later girls were all employed indiscriminately on the projects. Color, race, and background had no meaning. If they needed a job and were willing to work, as long as we had the funds, we employed them.

F: Was there much in the way of sort of "make work" projects that you had in WPA?

D: Well, of course, all projects were "make work" projects. But in making work we started out by making roadside parks. Now as you know Texas has got a pretty good system of roadside parks which NYA helped the highway department build. It was done with highway department funds for material, NYA funds for labor. And some two or three hundred parks were built in the period of six or seven years. La Villita in San Antonio is an outstanding project which is still there today and will be there fifty years from now--the restoration of a little Mexican village all done as a NYA project. Gynamsiums, home economic buildings, were built all over the state. Now if you call that "made work," yes, it was made, but it was substantial--

F: First time some of those country boys had ever played basketball indoors. I remember that.

D: That's correct.

F: Did the NYA throughout the country so far as you know sponsor this matter of roadside parks, or was this a Texas innovation?

D: As far as I know it was not a nationwide thing; there may have been one or two or three other States copy it, I just really don't know about that. But it was not a nationwide project. It was a Texas project and put together by LBJ and Dewitt Greer, another great Texan.

F: Do you think this has sort of been the start of what culminated during his Presidential administration as a general highway beautification interest?

D: Oh, yes. I think the experiences there contributed to what came during his Presidential years.

F: I do agree with you on one thing; that roadside parks is one development that Texas can be legitimately proud of.

D: That's correct.

F: Because it has served as sort of a model--

D: We built parks other than roadside parks, built the city parks and recreational areas. So his experiences there I am sure carried over to some of the things which he accomplished when he was President.

F: There was a flurry of state parks opening about that time, too. Do you know whether NYA had a role in that?

D: NYA had a role in some of them, but I would want to be fair and say that most of the state parks were developed by the CCC, which was another federal agency which came into being a few years ahead of NYA.

F: Now, he had had a good job with the NYA; why did he quit it to take the chance on getting defeated as a Congressional candidate?

D: Well, I think that having served as a Congressman's secretary in Washington, that he appreciated the work of a Congressman, and as I say he loved his job as secretary, and I think he wanted to be Congressman. I think probably that he felt that the area for public service would be a better area as a Congressman than it would as NYA Director. And as far as taking a chance

on being defeated, he has never been a fellow that was reluctant to take a chance.

F: Did you assist in the 1937 campaign?

D: Well, I guess statutes of limitation has run now--I was a federal employee. I did a few things.

F: Yes, the rules weren't as stringent then as they are now.

D: I didn't devote full time to it, though, as some folks did. He had campaign managers that devoted full time, and he had other folks that devoted full time. I was working for the NYA, and I continued to carry on my job.

F: So you were largely restricted to buttonholing.

D: Yes, meetings at night and over the weekends and times like that.

F: There is a story that I like and hope it's true that you offered him your savings account at that time to help underwrite a campaign. Is that right or not?

D: Well, I guess that's right. This is the way he tells the story these days, and it's substantially correct.

F: It's a good story and I'd rather it were true.

D: It is. I think I gave him around $500 which I had in my savings account. And I had a new Chevrolet automobile that he needed for a campaign car, and I gave him that. But before I did, I took it down to my hometown of Stockdale and borrowed another $500 on the car and gave him that $500 plus the car. So that's actually the facts in the story.

F: As far as you know, money was fairly tight?

D: As I say, I guess the statute of limitations has run out, and I don't remember whether that was reported or not.

F: As far as you know, campaign money was fairly tight in those days?

D: Oh, yes, sir, very tight. It's my recollection that that campaign was probably run on $10,000 or $15,000.

F: That wouldn't get public weigher now, would it?

D: No, it wouldn't buy you much television time.

F: Did you sit in on any of the strategy sessions? His strategy, of course, was to go all out for Roosevelt, and even to the endorsement of the so-called Supreme Court packing. Did he talk with you about what he was doing?

D: Well, I sat in some meetings where that was discussed, yes.

F: Was it generally agreed this was the approach, or was there fairly strong opposition to this approach?

D: I think it was generally agreed, as far as I recall, at that time. I would think he had some--in addition to the young fellows, most of us were pretty young then--there were some who were a little more mature like I mentioned, A. J. Wirtz. He was one of his real advisers and so was Claude Wild Sr. Claude was the campaign manager; Claude had managed one or two statewide campaigns, and so he was very helpful in that first campaign in which LBJ made it to Congress.

F: When you were in Houston with the Federal Land Bank, did you occasion to know Mr. Johnson's Uncle George?

D: Oh, yes. I'm glad you brought that up, because he was a great individual and a lovable man. And he had considerable influence on Lyndon's life. As a matter of fact, I think Uncle George loaned him some money to get through college. And then when Lyndon went to Houston to teach school, he lived with Uncle George and Aunt Jessie. Uncle George was a bachelor, never married, and Miss Jessie Hatcher was a widow who was a sister of Uncle George--

F: Was Uncle George on the mother's or on the father's side?

D: On the father--it was George Johnson. I believe he was the youngest of the three Johnson boys. He was a school teacher. As I say, he never married

and he lived with his widowed sister, Jessie Hatcher, who had been Jessie Johnson before she married. So Lyndon lived with Uncle George and Aunt Jessie--

F: While he was teaching school in Houston.

D: Yes. Uncle George taught history, as I recall it, in the old Sam Houston High School where Lyndon taught debate, so they rode together in Uncle George's car to work every day. Lyndon didn't have a car in those days. Just like myself, he didn't have a down payment on one. But living in the house with Uncle George and Aunt Jessie, he rode to school with him and Uncle George counselled him a lot. Uncle George was quite a historian himself and was interested in political affairs, because his brother, his brother-in-law, Clarence Martin, and various ones in his family had held political offices, though Uncle George never held any. He was a student of politics, student of the government, and he had, I think, a rather profound interest and influence on Lyndon about going into politics.

F: Was young Lyndon in those days as willing to talk politics twenty-four hours a day as he was later in his career?

D: Well, yes, except that he didn't talk it twenty-four hours a day when he was coaching the debating team; he darn near talked debate twenty-four hours a day. Whatever project that he undertakes, he goes all out with it. And during the time he was coaching the debating team, he was largely talking debate. Of course, Uncle George counselled him some on that, listening to his students and criticizing--helped him in his coaching.

F: So Mr. Johnson then was elected and he came to Washington. That sort of put the two of you at opposite ends of the world. When did you next come in contact in either an official or unofficial capacity?

D: Well, that was when he came back from Washington to Austin to be NYA

director; he called me long distance from Washington, I was in Houston at the Federal Land Bank, and asked me to come to Austin and help him set up his organization. He said get a leave of absence from the Federal Land Bank, which I did, technically I'm still on thirty-four years later--

F: That's a long leave.

D: They don't remember, but I do.

F: You haven't resigned yet.

D: No, I haven't gone back to claim my rights at the Federal Land Bank.

F: You may get your retirement papers one of these days.

When he came then to be a Congressman, of course he came back and ran again in the regular election and kept on running; then in '41 as you know he ran for the Senate. Were you active in that campaign?

D: Well, to some extent. Again I was still working for the National Youth Administration, and so I observed the Hatch Act fairly well. But I knew what was going on and did all that I could within the bounds of regulations of government.

F: Let's talk a little bit about that '41 campaign. As you know, there were three principal candidates; there was Congressman Johnson and Attorney General Gerald Mann and Governor O'Daniel.

D: No, there were four principal candidates; Martin Dies Sr.

F: That's right. What was Mr. Johnson's strategy? The first thing he had to do was make the runoff.

D: That's not correct.

F: And so--was there a runoff in that one?

D: No, that was a special election. Senator Sheppard had died.

F: And so he had to finish first. Well, what was his particular strategy? In a four-man race like that you've got some real problems, and all of them

four pretty good men as far as the public interest was concerned. How did he plan to neutralize, particularly, Mann and Dies?

D: I can't recall, Joe, specifically the answer to that question. Generally, though, this was his problem. Pappy O'Daniel, of course, was Governor, had been an unbeatable man. Gerald Mann was a very popular Attorney General--

F: And was known statewide--

D: Oh, he had been an All-American football player as you recall at Southern Methodist University, known as the "Little Red Arrow," and on the sports page of every paper in the State for several years. So his name was a byword with everybody; so was O'Daniel's. And Martin Dies, the Congressman from East Texas, had headed the Dies Committee which had had lots of publicity at the time. So Congressman Johnson's problem was that he was known only in the Tenth District. He had been known to some extent in his NYA work, but only to the county judges and the school superintendents and folks like that that he came in contact with in administering the program over a period of a couple of years. So his problem was to become known. And as I recall, and there were other campaigns which followed--I'm not sure whether it was the '41 campaign or the '48 campaign to make himself known where he was the first man I guess to campaign in the helicopter.

F: That was '48.

D: All right, that was '48. Well, in '41 he just had to make speeches, he had to be in as many towns as he could--had radio in those days but no television; he made some radio talks. But he would travel five or six hundred miles a day, as I recall, in a car.

F: He was just going to make up in energy what he lacked--

D: He made up in energy. And he always had a knack for knowing how to see the newspaper people when he got into a city, or a smaller town. He would

make the rounds and see them and shake hands up and down the main street and go through the courthouse shaking hands with everybody and moving fast, never stopping to get in an argument, trying to see--. And he never missed anybody on the street, didn't make any difference whether he looked like he had a poll tax or didn't; he wasn't taking any chances. He shook hands with every one of them, but he never let them involve him in an argument. He moved fast and made the town and got in his car and drove seventy miles an hour to the next one. He worked it that way, and he worked sixteen or eighteen hours a day.

F: It seemed to me, observing him fairly closely, that he has a phenomenal memory not just for names and faces, but for the people behind those names and faces. Is this something that he consciously developed? Is it instinctive? You will agree--

D: Yes. I don't know the answer to that question; I don't know. I assume, like everything else--

F: You must have observed him in action.

D: Yes. As you know, he has a very perceptive mind, and I think he said, "I must know this fellow the next time I see him." And I think he just made a mental imprint in the back of his mind so he could recall names and faces.

F: I have seen a few instances, and you probably could put some on the record, in which he would see a person who had no right to think that Mr. Johnson would know him; and Mr. Johnson would not only call him by name, but would ask him some sort of a personal question to let him know that he did know him.

D: Yes, that's correct.

F: You then went into the service, Mr. Johnson went into the service, and he came home at President Roosevelt's order to all Congressman to come back; you didn't see much of Mr. Johnson then during the war years?

D: No, not a lot. I saw him some, though. After he was back--

F: Of course, you were in Washington for awhile, though.

D: I was stationed here for a year. So during that year I saw quite a bit of him.

F: And that's when he was back here as a Congressman?

D: Yes, that's after Roosevelt had recalled all Congressmen out of the service, he was back here and on duty as a Congressman at that time.

F: Did you--

D: You will recall there were sixty or eighty of the Congressmen that went into service, and Mr. Roosevelt, through an executive order, just ordered them all back in after some six or eight or ten months.

F: Did you get any idea of the closeness of President Roosevelt and Congressman Johnson?

D: Well, yes, I did by talking with Congressman Johnson. I never, of course, came in contact with President Roosevelt. But I saw during the year that I stayed here quite a bit of Congressman Johnson.

And if I may interpose a personal thing. After I was gone from Washington for awhile in the Atlantic--I was transferred to the Pacific in 1945, the spring of '45, and stopped off in Washington and got married to the girl I've been married to twenty-four years. And LBJ was the best man at our wedding, so I could not let that personal thing go by without pointing that out.

F: I think it's worth putting in. Incidentally, what was your wife's name?

D: Jeanie Fitzpatrick from Bayonne, New Jersey. She was in the Navy, also; I had met her here in the Navy, and we got married in the chapel at Fort Myer. Her sister was the matron of honor, and LBJ was the best man.

F: While we're on that, did you participate in Mr. Johnson's marriage?

D: No, sir, I didn't. He got married in San Antonio; you've got that story, I'm sure, in another--

F: Right.

D: --tape, so I won't enumerate.

F: I've got it in Dan Quill and just about everybody in San Antonio.

D: Yes.

F: So you then go back to Texas when the war is over?

D: That's right.

F: Were you around for his campaign against Hardy Hollers?

D: Oh, yes. And I was working for Mrs. Johnson's radio station, and I had no Hatch Act to observe.

F: Tell me a bit about that campaign, because it seems to be--there are about four campaigns that stand out in Mr. Johnson's long history; one, of course, is the original one; one is the one against Pappy O'Daniel; the Hardy Hollers one; and the one in '48. The other campaigns are more or less routine.

D: The Hardy Hollers campaign was in '46, I believe.

F: That's right. It was a mean campaign.

D: Yes. Well, here's what happened, of course. The war was over; people were in a negative frame of mine generally; Truman was President and inherited an impossible job from Roosevelt of winding up the war and trying to get back into a peacetime economy. So there was resentment against that. Lyndon had always been a staunch Democrat, so Hardy Hollers, who was running as a Democrat at that time and has since turned Republican, he took after him and challenged him on his association with Roosevelt and with Truman, as I recall; and challenged his war record. We said a few minutes ago that Roosevelt called all the Congressmen back. And he belittled Lyndon's war record, pointing out that he had been in for four years and Lyndon had

been in for eight months or something like that. It was basically that kind of a campaign. In other words, he put Lyndon Johnson on the defensive as much as he could, and it was a pretty tough campaign.

F: I recall he also made charges against how Congressman Johnson had paid for his house out on Dilman. Do you remember that?

D: No, I don't remember that; I have no recollection of that.

F: Well, he tried to make an issue that there was something--he never was very explicit and I don't know that he could have been.

D: I'll tell you a very interesting little sidelight. One of Hollers' men who was backing him, John McKay, made a speech in Wooldridge Park one night; and he was belittling the fact that Lyndon had at one time in Congress proposed to make the Colorado River navigable up to Austin. He belittled that and talked about the shows and the shallowness of it, but he said, "Can't you just imagine hearing that steamboat coming around the bend into Austin?" And one of his stooges out in the back of the park had an old steamboat whistle [makes sound of whistle]. Of course, the crowd roared and laughed. It was a nice political gimmick. But of course they didn't have enough to prevail as history shows; Lyndon won rather handily, I believe.

F: Then in '48 he decided to come back for the Senate.

D: That's correct.

F: He gave up a lot of seniority in Congress there; why do you think he--

D: Yes, from '37 to '48--that's eleven years, I guess.

F: Why did he decide to move out?

D: Well, you know he had run for the Senate in '41--we've talked briefly about that. But I think it was an opportunity for bigger service, and he could do a good job as Senator. I said earlier he was never one averse to taking a chance.

I sat in some backyard sessions on that, too, and some of his friends advised him that it would be too difficult; said Coke Stevenson had been a very popular Governor and Coke had already announced that he was running for Senator, and it was just an unsurmountable object.

F: Coke Stevenson surprisingly received the endorsement of organized labor during that campaign which is about as far from expectations, I think, as you could get. How did Mr. Johnson hope to neutralize that sort of opposition?

D: I really don't recall how he proposed to handle that.

F: Did you work actively in this campaign?

D: Yes, sir.

F: What did you do?

D: Well, I toured the state some, did some passing out of literature and calling on newspapers and radio stations. We had little squads of four or five people get in the car and we'd go through every town passing out literature. I worked that way, and I did some work with contacting the radio stations around over the state. At that time I was in the radio business, and Lady Bird's radio station was becoming rather well known, so I contacted some of the radio people and appealed to the selfish interest by saying, "Certainly it wouldn't hurt us any to have a man in the United States Senate who is familiar with the problems of broadcasting." To that extent I--

F: Did you get a fairly good response?

D: Well, I think I did.

F: Did you make any speeches?

D: No, I've never been much of a speech maker.

F: When his schedule got too tight or something went wrong, did he have someone on hand who perhaps could fill in for him for certain speeches, or did he just always make them?

D: I have a vague recollection that John Connally filled in some, and that Lady Bird filled in some, where he just had to be in two places at once and it couldn't be done.

F: Did he have a tendency in those days to run late the way he does now? By staying too long where he was?

D: I don't remember specifically the answer to that question.

F: Were you there around the Congressman when the returns started coming in and it was evident how close it was going to be?

D: Oh, yes, sir.

F: Tell me a little bit about that waiting period.

D: Well, the election was on Saturday as I recall. During Sunday--now, wait a minute, I'm getting my '41 and '48 confused. We're talking about '48 now.

F: Yes. In '48 in the first primary, the third factor was this George Petty.

D: Yes, George Petty.

F: And now he's eliminated.

D: That's correct.

F: And so then Johnson led the ticket.

D: No, he didn't. Coke led the ticket and Johnson was behind, as I recall, 70,000 votes.

F: That's right. And Johnson had to make up the difference?

D: That's correct. Now I do remember that at that time the people predicted that the George Petty vote--he was, as I recall, a rather conservative fellow--that those votes would basically go to Coke Stevenson; and that Johnson would not have a chance. Some folks advised him to throw in the towel. And for a day or two we had backyard sessions and night sessions in which a dozen folks would get together and talk. Finally when time for a decision came, I recall that Lyndon said, "No, you're wrong. We can win

it if we're willing to work hard enough to do it." And that picked up the spirits of the folks; we saw that--he was going to have to work harder than anybody, so we agreed to work hard. And that was the turning point; it turned on that statement, "We can win it if we're willing to work hard enough to do it."

F: Where did your idea for the helicopter come from?

D: I don't know; I would guess it was his.

F: Did you ever go on one of these helicopter--?

D: No, sir, no, I didn't. I was around a place or two where they landed, but I never flew with him. As a matter of fact it was a small machine; and, as I recall, it would be the pilot and him and possibly one other fellow--Carroll Keach or Herbert Henderson or somebody who could write speeches between towns. There are stories about Herbert Henderson sitting in the floor of the helicopter typing it as fast as Lyndon could talk it, and he could; he was a remarkable fellow that could put words and sentences together and have a finished speech--

F: Is Herbert Henderson still alive?

D: No, he died a good many years ago.

F: I haven't run across his trail. Carroll Keach, though, is still in Robstown, isn't he?

D: Robstown newspaper business.

F: We haven't seen him yet, but will.

Let's go back now to that evening, or that series of evenings because there were several days before you got the final return.

D: It was days before--

F: Where did you set up your office; where was your listening post for all of this?

D: As I recall it was headquarters downtown in an old building called the Hancock Home or something. That was the headquarters, but the real strategy took place at LBJ's home on Dilman Street, or it was in his backyard with a lot of backyard furniture and lights in the yard. It being summertime, most of the sessions--nighttime sessions--took place in the yard.

F: How long would they last?

D: Oh, I don't remember. But they weren't short.

F: Was he on the phone a good bit of the time, or were his subordinates on the phone? In other words, how did they keep tab of what was going on beyond listening to the radio?

D: Oh, yes, lots of phones. Incidentally, in the backyard there was a phone out there--one of the early backyard phones that I remember seeing. We got an old rural mail box and nailed it on a tree and got the phone company to run an extension inside the house and we set the phone inside the mail box so that if it rained, it was kept out of damage; and if he needed the phone, he just reached up and opened the mail box and it had a long extension cord and he got it out. So the phone was right there in the backyard. Oh, yes, he was on the phone a dozen times an hour, talking all over the state to various folks, getting their advice and information from them.

F: How was his organization set up? Was it by districts, by counties, by county seats--do you remember?

D: Specifically I don't, but generally yes. He tried to have a county manager in each county, at least all the populous counties. I don't recall that there was a district set up, but he had key men and sometimes county managers in all populous counties.

F: So he'd call someone in Monahan, for instance, and ask them what was going on out there?

D: That's correct.

F: Did he think he was going to lose another squeaker as he had in '41? Did you ever see any evidence that his faith was a little shaken?

D: Well, he was a man of great faith and great determination. And I think his philosphy had been that you must always run scared, but you must always have a certain innate confidence while you're running scared. I think he always to his staff people displayed that innate confidence that it could be done, "if we just try hard enough."

F: What was Mrs. Johnson's role during this period of waiting?

D: Well, Mrs. Johnson was very much an advisor. She sat in on all of them. She didn't speak very often, but when she did speak she had something to say and it was listened to; she has always been a great influence in his life, more so than most folks realize.

F: Did the Congressman and then Senator take much of a hand around the radio station--later the TV station while you were there?

D: Well, of course I never worked at the TV station. Around the radio station, no; he might come through twice a week and make some suggestions, but Jesse Kellam was the manager of it and Jesse ran it.

F: And the same way with Mrs. Johnson? Just sort of look in, or was she more active than he?

D: I think probably she spent more time with it than he did.

F: What? Just going over the problems and possibilities?

D: Oh, yes. She went over the sales reports and the weekly reports and the monthly reports; she knew what was going on all the time. She poured over them. If you didn't know the answer to what was on your own sales report, you'd better know because she might ask you about it on a Sunday session that we'd have.

F: You had a once a week session in which you went over--

D: Frequently.

F: This is the whole staff or just the sales--?

D: Well, the key people. Sales staff and key people.

F: Did the Senator encourage you to move over to KVET because you did have some ownership possibilities?

D: Well, I went with his good wishes--we'll put it that way.

F: John Connally had that station at that time, didn't he?

D: John was the manager, and the principal owner at that time, yes, sir, along with a number of other fellows.

F: Now Connally of course was a long-time administrative assistant to Congressman and Senator Johnson, and they were business competitors. Did they ever collide as competitors?

D: Many times. And Kellam and I collided a good many times after I became manager over there. You know, you can be personal friends and compatriots in politics, but where a dollar is concerned it's every man for himself. So we competed vigorously and constantly for the business.

F: It never made any difference, though, in the personal relationship between John Connally and Lyndon Johnson, the fact that each one of them was going for the same dollar?

D: Tried not to, let's put it that way. Occasionally the situation would get a little tense.

F: Can you recount any instances?

D: No, I don't think so.

F: When the now Senator was in the Senate as he was for a dozen years, did you have much contact with him?

D: Not a lot. No, I was in Austin continually and he was in Washington most of the time. When he'd come home I'd see him occasionally.

F: When he'd come home, would he continue to have these backyard sessions out on Dilman, or did this cease as he got busier?

D: Being a Senator, he served statewide, and I don't recall any backyard sessions during his Senate term as he had when he was running for the Senate.

F: Did you take any part in the pre-convention strategy in Los Angeles in 1960?

D: No, sir. I went out there, but I know very little about what took place there; I don't believe I could shed much light on that.

F: Were you prepared for his, one, being offered the vice presidential nomination, and, two, his accepting it?

D: No, I really wasn't. Tell you what I did. After Kennedy was nominated on the first ballot--of course, I was disappointed--I got on the plane and came on home.

F: But not surprised?

D: Not surprised, no. I got there a day or two ahead of the convention, and it was obvious what was going to happen. But you always can hope. But I got on the plane and came home; and it was only when I got off the plane in Austin that I heard that he had been tapped for the vice presidency nomination and had accepted it.

F: Did you work any with the campaign?

D: No, not a lot. Oh, I helped a little, but, no, it was a statewide thing--the statewide Democratic people ran it, and the Kennedy and the Johnson folks, on a statewide basis. No, I cannot say that I had any real part in that campaign.

F: Let's talk one more moment about business relationships. You moved over to KVET then during just about the time that television began to appear; and of course KTBC got the first television channel authorization. Did you make any serious attempt to get a television channel authorized?

D: No, but I'll tell you something that I don't think has ever been told before. There has been a lot of talk about LBJ having the only television channel, it was the only VHF channel there, there was a UHF applying at the time. But when he applied he told me and he told Wendell Mayes who owns radio station KNOW, said, "I'm going to apply for that television and if you want to come in with me, let's talk about it." And it was going to take considerable money, and I certainly didn't have any; I was trying to pay for what I already had. I don't know what Wendell's situation was, but I said no, thank you, and Wendell said, no, thank you; so there was no competition for it. Nobody else filed for it. Anybody in the city or the state or the nation could have filed, but at that time television was an unknown quantity; it was very much of a gamble--

F: And it used lots of money.

D: And it took lots of money. And as I say, I was trying to pay for what I had already undertaken, and Wendell, for a man of good judgment, he passed on the situation. So the LBJ company went ahead and applied and was granted it.

F: Did you ever see any evidence in later years that Senator Johnson or Vice President Johnson used his status here to keep down competition?

D: No, sir, I never did.

F: You think he just got an early start, and then he held it.

D: That's right. I might point out this, sir. There have been a lot of stories written and they've never been documented. There were stories, "Austin is the largest city in the United States that has only one VHF channel." Well, they overlooked the capital of Louisiana, Baton Rouge, a comparable sized city, one; they overlooked Montgomery, Alabama, one; they overlooked Madison, Wisconsin, one; I can think right off of three with comparable

situations. But they were never written up in the trade journals. Those allocations were made on the basis of the size of the town and of the strength of the market for supporting them; and as a capital city as Austin or Madison, Wisconsin, are--Baton Rouge had some industry; Montgomery I'm not sure about, but the theory behind it was that there just wasn't enough business there to support more than one; and how close are you to other towns? Austin was within seventy miles of San Antonio where they allocated three; Baton Rouge was within seventy miles of New Orleans where they allocated three; Montgomery was a little further from Mobile where maybe there were two--

F: And Birmingham on the other side.

D: And Birmingham and Georgia--it was sort of hemmed in. Madison, Wisconsin, I assume, is fairly close to Milwaukee. So I can think of at least those four with comparable situations, but the public never heard about those. And all the publicity that went during his political experiences, so it made good political thunder to talk about. But that's the facts of it.

F: Well, those towns, of course, didn't produce a television owner who became a national figure. I don't know what would have happened if George Wallace had been President; it might have made some difference in Montgomery. So you would deny, then, that there was any sort of a sinister plot to keep down competition in the Austin area?

D: I would say that the story was grossly overstated, and I never saw any evidence of it. I might say that in later years when I decided to apply for a UHF grant, I got it; when Mr. Kingsbury tried to apply for a UHF grant, he got it. I sold mine to Roy Butler, now he has sold it to a man in Lubbock. And the man in Lubbock says he is going to build it. Of course, Mr. Kingsbury did build his and operates it.

F: Back to 1960, you received the news then that Senator Johnson had accepted the vice presidential nomination, and of course he went on to get elected. Did you see much of him, then, in the Vice Presidential period?

D: No, very little. Again when he would come home, occasionally I'd see him. I don't recall that I ever visited in Washington during his term as the Vice President.

F: Then came November 22, 1963. Where were you that day?

D: I was in Austin in the Austin Club at lunch when I heard the tragic news.

F: Had you been involved at all in the preparations for the Kennedy address that night out at Municipal Auditorium?

D: Yes, sir, I was. I was on the committee to help set it up; I still have in my souvenirs the tickets which I had bought for the occasion; I still have those. I remember very fondly I was looking forward to the dinner that evening.

F: What was your immediate reaction if you can recall when the news came to you in the Austin Club? How did it come--some waiter tell you, or did they announce it generally?

D: I was sitting at the lunch table with a group of other fellows, and somebody ran in and said, "My God, the President has been shot!" Everybody was startled, and we ran to the television set which was on with the noontime news, and it said, FLASH, FLASH, FLASH--NEWS BULLETIN, NEWS BULLETIN, NEWS BULLETIN, and it came on and told it. Of course, I didn't finish my lunch; it was a terrible shock, and I left and went back to my office.

F: Did you have any contact with President Johnson in that immediate period afterwards?

D: No, sir.

F: Did you write him or call him?

D: I don't recall. I think probably I wrote him the next day or the day thereafter, but I just don't recall. Of course, I was in Austin, and he was in Dallas; he went immediately back to Washington. I knew that he was far too busy to be taking any telephone calls from me.

F: Before you came up here to stay, did you ever come up to visit him?

D: When he was in the Presidency?

F: Yes.

D: No, I don't believe I did. Well, yes, I was up here at the broadcasters' convention in 1964, I believe--no, the spring of '65. I forget--'64 or '65. I guess '65. And he heard that Jean and I were in town--Lady Bird did and called and invited us over to the White House for dinner. But I believe that was the only time that I visited in the White House prior to the time that I moved to Washington.

F: You told Mr. McComb a little something about this at the outset of your interview with him. But did you have any forewarning at all that you were going to be named an ICC Commissioner, or did this just come out of the blue?

D: Oh, you know, we had talked to the President about it. I saw him when he was home at the ranch after he became President. No, it was not a surprise.

F: Was this the position he had specifically in mind, or were several discussed?

D: Well, he offered me this job, and I was delighted to take it.

F: You kind of outlasted him, didn't you?

D: Well, we shall see.

F: Right.

D: I had a seven-year term and he only had a four.

F: You've watched him now for better than forty years; what development have you seen, what evolving, what changes have you noticed, or what sort of intensification of the old characteristics have you seen through the years?

D: I think the big change in Lyndon Johnson came when he had the heart attack, I believe, in 1954. Up until that point he had always been very much in a hurry in everything that he did; he moved with speed; he was impatient to get on with the job to be done whether it was running the NYA, whether it was coaching the debate team, or whether it was in campus politics, or running the committee in the House or the Senate that he was working on. He was always impatient to move on. I think during his recuperative period from the heart attack, there was a change in his philosophy and his thinking. He became more deliberate and more dedicated. I think he really during that period came to an almost religious devotion to dedicating the rest of his life to doing the most he could for his government. Not for his personal aggrandizement, but I think he had seen--as a man does sometimes when he comes up to the brink of death and looks over, and then draws back, he has a lot of communication with himself. I think during that recovery period he decided to devote the very best of his efforts to making for a better United States in which to live, and I think he has done that. I think that was his primary motive in every move since his heart attack.

F: Do you think he works no less hard, but he moves less at a gallop and more in a kind of conservation of energy?

D: He's more deliberate, he's more thoughtful of the people of lesser energy. There was a time in his life when he seemed to be impatient with the folks of lesser ability, of lesser energy; but that's no longer true, and it hasn't been since 1954 or '55 whenever it was when he had the heart attack, and a long period of recovery.

I might point out I think during that period of recovery he played cards with his daughters--they were children at the time, and he had time to talk and visit with them where heretofore it had been, "Daddy loves you,

kiss me," and run. But there was a slowing down of his speed--I say deliberate speed, because he was geared to go faster; naturally his tendency is to go fast, but I think he deliberately geared himself down.

F: Deliberately, he still outruns most people.

D: Yes, he does, even today.

F: You think then that he moved into a more nearly normal family relationship also at that time?

D: Yes, I think so.

F: Take more time out to--

D: Yes, had more time for his children; realized the value of having hours with them.

F: Is he a sentimental man?

D: Very sentimental, very sentimental. Not very many people see it in him from a casual glance, but he's very sentimental. He loves his family, he loves his friends, he loves, of course, the ranch and the hill country.

F: He seems to be a man who always runs with the same people; that is, the people he worked with are the people he likes to be with. And while he ranges very widely, on the whole he's not seeking the company of strangers--he's not seeking new friends. Do you agree with that?

D: No, I wouldn't agree with that statement. I think that he is all the time, even today, seeking new friends. Now I think he still likes to get back in contact, or what he calls "commune," with his old friends; and I'm very proud of the fact that he still likes to commune with me occasionally. I visited him at the ranch last week and spent the night with him.

F: What did you'all do?

D: Well, of course, we drove around in the afternoon and looked at the ranch and looked at the deer and the antelope and the wild turkey, and--

F: That's routine.

D: --he gets a real thrill, but he gets as much thrill, though, out of the Hereford cows having the calves--they were calfing at the time. And he'd say, "Look there, that one was born last night probably," and this one was four or five days old--you could tell by whether he was following his mama or whether he was wobbling on his legs. So he spent considerable time looking at his new calves and talking basically about the ranch. And I might say that if I can read the man and I've been trying to for forty years, he's very happy with his lot in life at this time. Certainly, that's true with Lady Bird. I spent some time with her, and they're happy at the ranch. A lot of folks expected them not to be.

F: Did you'all sit up fairly late talking?

D: No, we went to a movie. He likes to have movies.

F: Where? Out there in the barn?

D: It was the barn, they preferred to call it the hangar, and now they've got a movie screen in there and have moved in some chairs. And I might say that he had one of the girls who works there for him get on the phone and call all the neighbors, there must have been fifty people in the surrounding--farmers in the area, all the people on the ranch, the helpers, the servants in the house all were invited to the movie and they all came.

F: Is he seeing a good bit of the people around Stonewall?

D: I think he does. I just spent the one day with him. He called Father Schneider, who's pastor of the little Catholic church over at Albert, and he came over for the movie. He's very fond of Father Schneider; of course, he's not Catholic, but he has a great rapport with Father Schneider. Father sat next to him during the movie that night, and occasionally I'd hear them chatting and laughing about it.

F: You hear the remark occasionally that he never, despite his occasional show of temper--that he can never bring himself to fire anybody. Do you agree with that?

D: Oh, well, that's a fair statement. Again we get back to his being a very sentimental man.

F: Basically he likes people.

D: He likes people and he sees the good in them; that maybe one of his weaknesses is that he would refuse to see the weakness of some people around him. If they had some good qualities, he liked to accentuate the good qualities and try to overlook the negative qualities. And without getting into specifics, I would say there would have been times when he got himself in hot water by being too good to people.

F: I was going to ask--there have been some instances of people who have been less than wholly loyal to him and yet he kept them on. Do you think this is part of that pattern?

D: I think that is brought on by his philosophy of trying to negate any poor qualities a man has and dwell upon his good qualities. I'll put it this way--he has never been a fellow to appreciate mediocrity, so he has wanted people around him who were able people; and sometimes the most able people are also the most disloyal people. There may have been some cases where in his admiration for their ability he had a tendency to overlook their disloyalty; I think there are some cases like that.

F: When did you first begin to suspect that you had a friend who might be President of the United States some day?

D: I guess when I was back in school in San Marcos with him.

F: You thought it was possible even then; it was an awfully long shot from San Marcos.

D: Yes, sir, that's right, but he's a fellow that even then had broad vision, and he had the will to work at anything that he wanted to do.

F: Did he give any indication in those days that he was going to seek higher and higher office?

D: I don't remember specifically, but I know he--in Hayes County which is where San Marcos is located, he was campaign manager for Welly Hopkins who was running for the state senate even while he was in college. So I knew that he was conscious of and conversant with political activities even when we were in college.

F: When he went to Houston to teach school, did you think that he was going to become a professional school teacher, or did you look on this as just sort of a holding action?

D: I did not think that would be enough of a challenge for him for many years.

F: Thank you, Mr. Deason.

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GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
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Gift of Personal Statement

By Willard Deason

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, Willard Deason, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

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Signed Willard Deason

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