INTERVIEW VII

DATE: April 6, 1988

INTERVIEWEE: WILLARD DEASON

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. Deason's residence, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: You want to start?

D: Yes. We've had several interviews in the past dozen years, primarily about Lyndon Johnson and what I knew about him and my relation with him in college, and in the NYA [National Youth Administration] days and at different times in our lifetime. However, I have never talked much about the presidency and his inner feelings about things, which were revealed to me occasionally. As you know, I had no official capacity in or around the White House. He appointed me to the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1965, and my work there was just about as far removed from the White House or any White House influence as any job in Washington. So actually what I will say [is] about my experiences and knowledge and my impressions--part of it will be impressions, part of it will be knowledge--of what went on primarily in his mind.

I will start by relating an incident that actually took place before I moved to Washington in 1965. We had talked at the Ranch at Christmas time earlier about--he had asked me if I wanted to come up there and be a part of his official family. I said, yes, as a matter of fact, I had been looking forward to it for some thirty years. He said, "All right.

Get your things in order and when you're ready we'll work out something." So I sold my radio station and got cash for it, so I had no obligations in Austin anymore other than my family.

It was either in April or May--I rather think May--that I went up to Washington to talk definitely about it and tell him, "Now I'm ready." He said, "All right. What would you like to do?" I said, "Well, I guess I'm best fitted with my background for a job at the Federal Communications Commission." He said, "I agree you are, but you can't see the Promised Land. You've been in the broadcasting business and my family is still in it. My relations are on a blind trust basis, but if I appoint you to the Federal Communications Commission the press would eat us both up. So let's forget that." Incidentally, there was a vacancy there. "Let's move on to where we've got some vacancies."

So he outlined two or three jobs for me. One of them was the Interstate Commerce Commission; there was a vacancy there. Another one was in the banking field, banking regulation; there was a vacancy there. And another one I forget now because we didn't discuss it much. But I thought I would be interested in the banking job. He said, "Well, there's one thing about that that you ought to think about a long time before you take it. That you serve at the pleasure of the President, and the Interstate Commerce Commission is a seven-year appointment." I said, "Well, by the time you finish out this term and then another one the banking job would be seven years"--assuming he would keep me on. He said, "Well, let me tell you something about that. Now don't say anything about it"--and I haven't since I'm telling you now--"I don't plan to run again for another term. So if you took this job you'd have about three-and-a-half years on it and then it would be over with, and some other president would be in and he'd appoint whoever he wanted. You'd probably

be out of a job. But you can take the one at the Interstate Commerce Commission and you'll be there for seven years."

The Interstate Commerce Commission--parenthetically I'm speaking now--is a bipartisan commission. It was at the time eleven members. No more than six could be from any political party, so it was bipartisan. Well, usually whoever was in power had the power [to fill] a vacancy; it would be six Democrats and five Republicans or five Democrats and six Republicans. It was operated pretty much on a non-partisan basis. So I took that job.

I point that out to tell you that in 1965 when he was riding high he confided to me that he had already--he and Lady Bird had discussed it and that he would not run at the end of that term. So I put that in for the record as a fact of what he told me. Now, let's--

G: Did you question him about his decision at all?

D: No, no, no. He stated it as though it were a fact. Not at that time but at various times before that and since that time he had said to me, "I will be lucky to serve out this term." You've heard this reported over about it. He said, "[In] my family the men all died early with heart attacks and I'll be lucky to make out the term through the end of 1968." And I had that in the back of my mind, and I didn't want to press him and get him to thinking about that again. So I just accepted it and I said, "All right. I'll take the Interstate Commerce Commission job,"--which I did, parenthetically, and stayed the seven years. And then at the end of that time Nixon was president, and he reappointed me and I served on until I was seventy years old and mandatory retirement brought me home. Now, let's rest a minute.

(Interruption)

D: . . . be a different item. I've just finished telling you about my conversation with the President when I agreed that I would take and he would give to me the appointment at the Interstate Commerce Commission. After we had had that conversation I think--it was Friday--he said, "Now I'll probably go up to Camp David tomorrow. Won't you come go along with me? Call Jeanne and tell her you won't be home until Monday." So I said, "Fine." That was a real thing; I had heard about Camp David but I'd never seen it.

So Saturday morning we get in the plane and start flying to Camp David, and sat together and visited together while we were flying up there. And he told me, "I'm greatly troubled right now. Yesterday or day before I had a meeting with the top brass"--meaning of course the military--"and they urged and insisted if I just give them twenty-five or fifty thousand more men that it would get this Vietnam thing behind us pretty fast. And I just had a gut feeling it wasn't the right thing to do and I said, 'Let me think about it. I'll talk to you again Monday.'" He didn't say, but he told me, "I want to spend some time thinking about it at Camp David."

So he had three or four other folks--I don't remember now who they were. But he went up there and he tried to relax, and he'd walk up and down the roads and take some of us with him walking. He'd sit and look out the window at the Eisenhower golf course at Camp David. I could tell he was greatly troubled. He wasn't his same old humorous self that he normally was. But he [was] trying to make up his mind whether or not he would approve additional military men being sent to Vietnam. He said, "[Robert] McNamara tells me it's the thing to do." And that was about all that he talked about. That was just on the plane going up there. I don't think he'd talked about it anymore while we were there. But

Monday or Tuesday or Wednesday the story came out that the U.S. was going to commit some more men, so he made up his mind to follow McNamara and the top brass.

(Interruption)

D: While we're talking about his advice, which he got from McNamara--and I might say that he leaned heavily on him. He had a great respect for McNamara's so-called super mind. He was a whiz kid, you know, in his early years and achieved great economic success and then [went on] to government and great success there in a way. What I'm saying is that he leaned heavily on McNamara for his advice. He was able to make his own decisions but about the progress of the Vietnam War, it was my impression that he leaned heavily on McNamara.

To those who may possibly listen to this tape some day, they say, "Well, who is this fellow Deason? Why is he talking about all these things?" I might explain again that Lyndon Johnson and I were close personal friends from college days. And he was an extrovert and talked a lot and I was a pretty good listener. So frequently he asked me to be around when he was in trouble and just wanted to talk. For that reason Jeanne and I got invited to Camp David for a good many weekends. And there was an unwritten rule that you never talked about anything that happened there, and up until this time I never have. I'll just talk in general terms about it now because a lot of decisions were made while he was purportedly relaxing over the weekend at Camp David.

There were two other guests that he leaned on heavily for--I won't say advice--comfort and assistance for his trips up there. One of them was Bill White, the writer--William S. White--and his wife, and Marianne Means and her husband, and Jeanne and I; some of us [as a] group were there together and just had a weekend together.

Sometimes he would just think out loud and he needed people he could trust that way. Parenthetically I'll point out that Bill White and Marianne Means were both reporters and I read them religiously, and neither one of them never during the entire war or even after that betrayed his confidence on any of the discussions that took place there. They had inside information that no other writers had but they never, never disclosed any of it. Whatever was discussed there just didn't show up in their columns. I doff my hat to both of them for their friendship and integrity in treating things there that they learned and discussed--particularly with Bill White. He would discuss all the options of war and this and that, and even political appointments and who would he appoint to the Supreme Court and things like that.

I don't mean that he depended on us to make his decisions but he used us as a sounding board. And frequently Bill and I would disagree on things and so he'd--what he called "milk the minds." He talked all of his life about getting information out of people; he said, "milk their mind." He was milking our minds over the weekend as an example or cross section maybe of what he had to do. He never told us what a decision would be on Monday or Tuesday or next week but we usually knew pretty well by the way the discussion went. So we followed the progress of his inner thinkings about the Vietnam War.

G: Did he discuss the alternative to sending these additional people?

D: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

G: What did he think would happen if he didn't?

D: Well, he would discuss the pros and cons. He was very careful--and if you'll analyze the history on it--to say that, "We bombed so-and-so yesterday morning or on Wednesday but I

gave them specific instructions to hit only military establishments; never let a bomb fall on a civilian area." And he said, "I think we've done that pretty well." But of course, as you know, history says that some people said, "Just bomb the hell out of the whole thing and get it over with." But he never would commit himself to the killing of innocent civilians. Some probably were killed and after he was out I think probably more of them were killed. But that was one of his great dedications, that the civilian people not be killed even though the war might result in a stalemate or it might result in dragging out much longer. But he took that position and I think that was the position that McNamara advised him on.

G: This course of events took place after the Dominican Republic situation, where he'd gotten some troops in and resolved the situation and got them out. Do you think this success was on his mind at the time of this Camp David decision?

D: Probably was. He mentioned that just briefly at one time. He was kind of proud of that. Being a proud man he liked to talk about his successes. But just very briefly he mentioned--he said, "Well, we got in there and got them out before people knew what was going on." But that's the only time I recall that he ever mentioned that thing. That problem was behind him then. He wasn't much to reminisce on what had taken place.

G: I'm just wondering if he saw this as a similar process where they'd commit twenty thousand, fifty thousand more troops, get in, take care of it, and get out?

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

(Interruption)

D: My most vivid recollection of Mr. McNamara and his association with the President--incidentally I don't think I ever met McNamara; maybe I saw him at a big White House party. But we were never together socially as I was with a good many of the other

cabinet members. It just never worked out that way. But Jeanne and I were at a small--either Saturday or Sunday night, I think it was Sunday night--dinner at the White House. He always liked to have a few people around and he would have his personal friends so he could try to forget his problems. And he nearly always had, during the latter part of the Vietnam situation, one of his staff members and his wife so he'd have his staff member handy.

I remember one night that George Christian, and I think his wife Jo Anne was there and a few of the rest of us, and we were having dinner. Some sort of a buzz came on and he nodded at George and George got up and went out of the room to another phone. Incidentally the President had a phone right under his plate--underside of the table. He could reach his hand under there and pick up and talk even while he was having dinner, which he did on a few occasions. Usually in monotone, he'd say, "Yes. Uh huh. Yes. Uh huh. All right, go ahead," something like that. But George left and talked on the phone and he came--this must have been in early 1968, I'm not sure, maybe late 1967. Anyhow, he came back and the President just looked at him as if to say--and George's face was tense. And he said, "Now McNamara wants out." The President just looked like he wanted to faint. And he just tensed his lips as he did when he was thinking real hard and then just sort of said in a monotone, "I followed that fellow on every step of the way." Well, of course, the next morning it was announced on the air and in the papers that McNamara was resigning from the cabinet. That was all he said. I know what he was thinking. I think I repeated his exact words, "I have followed that fellow every step of the way."

I've pointed this out now to show what a great respect he had for McNamara's intelligence and I guess judgment and how disappointed he was when he found out that

McNamara, I think, had despaired of the thing turning out all like they thought it would in 1965 and 1966 and just wanted to throw in the towel which he did.

G: Why do you think McNamara quit?

D: Well, I really don't know. I think, but you never know what's in the back of a man's mind--but from my observation of history at that time and listening to many folks talk and upon reflection of McNamara's background . . . You remember that when President Kennedy was killed in Dallas and Lyndon Johnson became president that he retained all of the Kennedy cabinet. McNamara was secretary of defense, and he kept him through the end of that term and then took him again into his term. It's my interpretation [of] this--I cannot point to factual information like I have in the things, which I have just said--but you asked me what I thought. I think McNamara had two loyalties: A loyalty to his boss, Lyndon Johnson, and a loyalty to his Kennedy connections and to a thing which I call--and we'll talk about later--the Kennedy cult. I think he was torn between those two things. And as history has pointed out some and I'll talk about more, there was a great undercover struggle going on between the Johnson Administration and the Kennedy cult for the leadership of the United States. He was caught in the middle on that. And maybe he just wore out; maybe he saw what was coming and just decided it was a time to make a decision, go one way or the other. I don't know. But that is my impression of what went on.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview VII

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