

INTERVIEW VIII

DATE: April 15, 1988

INTERVIEWEE: WILLARD DEASON

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

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

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

D: Since talking last I have had two or three other thoughts about our conversations and our connections with President Johnson. So I'm going to relate two or three instances where I think it may shed a little light on history. I might say in preface to that that I hope that I have not given the impression that I was a close advisor of President Johnson on matters of great import. I wasn't. However, all of our lives he has sort of used me as a sounding board. I guess I'm a good listener. He'll have an idea he's not sure about but he would run it by me to get my reaction. In that way I in turn got to look inside of his thinking on a lot of questions that never materialized. Some of them did; some of them didn't. But that's the source of information which basically, if I have anything to contribute, comes more or less from that close personal association and the sounding board thing that I was used for.

One that comes to my mind; there's been a lot of question about whether or not he should have run in 1968 and whether or not he shouldn't have and things like that. I remember one discussion with some of his close friends that I shall not name but people whom he saw often and the question came up. He had always told us that he would not run again, but with the Vietnam War on, some of his friends insisted that he should run again;

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he had to run again, it was his responsibility to his country. They went on to say however it would be very difficult with the country divided as it was then. And his remark to that was, "Yes, but I could win again with all the trappings that the presidency takes into an election. I could win. But if I won, then I couldn't govern." Meaning of course that the country was so torn up and so many of them against him that there would just be more turmoil and he didn't want to bring that on. Basically, that idea was the fact that he decided not to run again. That came out in his announcement speech when he said he would not run again in so many words.

G: Did you have any advance notice that he was going to make that speech?

D: No. I was not surprised though when he made it. [Horace] Busby and a few of the other boys were at the White House the day before that and I had no knowledge of it. But, of course, as soon as he did it my phone started ringing and some of my friends who knew of my friendship with President Johnson started ringing up and saying, "Aren't you astounded?" I said, "No." He said, "What?" And I said, "No, I expected it." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, I mean just what I said. I was not surprised at all. I'd heard him talk about the possibilities in the past and it did not surprise me."

G: Let me ask one question. Do you think he ever had second thoughts about that March 31 speech in his decision? Do you think he ever after that decided or thought, "I wish I could run again," "I wish I were back in it?"

D: I never got that feeling at all. I got the feeling that he just wanted to do his best to wind it down and made all sorts of real efforts and some concessions in his personal life and

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historical life to try to do it. No, I never got the impression that he had any regrets about making the thirty-first speech.

Now I want to shift to what we might call another chapter in my observations of LBJ and the presidency and that period of time and discuss what I and other folks have referred to as the Kennedy cult. Not the Kennedy clan. The Kennedy clan was the people, the Kennedys. Bright and ambitious and active people, and had a lot going for them. The Kennedy cult was those who worshipped them; some who never saw Kennedy and looked him in the eye, but it was sort of a religious thing for them, and whatever a Kennedy did they believed in implicitly. There were leaders of the cult--I saw this when I went to Washington. I might say now that what I'm saying is based upon observation and impressions. What I've told you heretofore, was based on facts as I saw them. This thing is based more upon facts as I interpreted and heard. So this will be an interpretation and not a factual description. But throughout Washington from the day that President Kennedy died and let me say that was one of the saddest days of my life. I was a Jack Kennedy fan and I loved him. Of course it made Lyndon Johnson president, but as one of my friends pointed out to me the day it happened, he said, "You know, this makes your friend president." I said, "Yes, but I never wanted it that way, Jim," which I didn't of course. Nobody else in Texas did.

I was told second hand after I moved to Washington--but coming from very responsible sources--that the night after Jack Kennedy was buried there was a meeting at a big home in Virginia, some twenty or thirty people. Of course they were heartbroken. They were angry. They were greatly disappointed and they took what might be called a

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blood oath that night to avenge as long as they lived the thing that happened in Dallas.

They would avenge it on Dallas. They would avenge it on the state of Texas and they for a primary target which they have to have would avenge it on LBJ. So from that day forward they began quietly but industriously and deviously to work to undermine the government under LBJ's leadership.

They tried of course to win the nomination in 1964 but it didn't work and many of them that held jobs in the government--and you remember Johnson kept most of the cabinet and the sub-cabinet people and what you call "Schedule C" people. For those who don't know that, Schedule C could hold a high position with civil service rank but didn't have to take a civil service examination, didn't have to jump over anybody else to get it. But they were at the pleasure of the president of course and the pleasure of the cabinet member under whom they were serving. There were thousands of those folks in Washington. And after Johnson's re-election in 1964 they began to quietly move out of those Schedule C jobs because they ranked up at 14, 15, 16 civil service classification. They were moving into a civil service job to guarantee that they would be there from here on out and they moved into all the federal departments and agencies and quietly moved into there as they could work it out with the cabinet members or with the independent agency people who had been appointed by Kennedy and were still there and those folks moved into there. They took along with them sometimes some of their devotees and followers and their assistant secretaries and stenographers and stuff like that, those who could be trusted as a part of the Kennedy cult. Their ambition and their desire in life was to prolong the Kennedy regime in American government.

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Of course, that probably would have come to fruition if Bobby had not been killed. It started breaking up at that time and it carried on some but it never had fervor beyond that point and I would doubt if it existed of any import up until now but it was a silent, important push--movement--with almost a religious zeal that went on for a dozen years and I've never heard of any historian that's talked about it. I'm sure they know about it, but maybe it's because it's difficult to document. As I said with me, I could not document this. It's just an impression. You know it's there. You feel it. You see it.

G: Well, was LBJ aware for example of the meeting of Virginia?

D: I can't answer that question. I don't know.

G: Do you think he was aware of this move from the Schedule C positions into regular civil service?

D: Yes, he was aware of it but he was a fellow who would take the big problem first. Plus the fact that there was not a lot he could [do] about it. If they found a job they could move to and they had a civil service status and the folks over there wanted it there's not a lot a president can do about a civil service appointment. His attitude has always been don't expend your resources on a problem you can't correct.

G: Do you think he felt in retrospect that he made a mistake keeping the Kennedy cabinet members and staff members?

D: I think so but I never heard him say it. Some people would bring it up sometime and his lips would get tight and he'd look off in the other direction. You've seen that expression on him, which means, "Let's don't talk about that anymore." No, I never heard him make a critical remark along that line.

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G: He seems to have gotten along very well with Jack Kennedy.

D: Oh, yes, he did. He did. The historians say he was unhappy as vice president and maybe he was but I never heard him criticize Jack Kennedy. I'll tell you an interesting little side light to show you the way Jack Kennedy operated and why he was so loveable. At the 1960 Democratic convention in Los Angeles I was there as an observer. I was not a delegate but the Texas delegation had a caucus and decided what they were going to do. They invited Jack Kennedy to come over and address them. I didn't think he'd come but he did. He just walked in like, "I'm not afraid to come in here." But two steps behind him was Bobby and the chairman opened the meeting and LBJ was there. He made a talk to jibe Jack Kennedy some and talked about, well, what his record in leadership was and what some other folks who were there to vote some of the time and some of the other times they weren't there to vote--of course referring to Jack Kennedy's frequent absence from the Senate, and when he got through they called on Jack Kennedy to talk. He said, "Well, that was a very interesting relation that Lyndon just pointed out here about his great record, and it was; he had it and he talked about some folks that didn't vote as often as maybe he thought they ought to. But he didn't say who it was so I assume he wasn't talking about me." Of course, got big applause. Even Bobby grinned a little bit. That was one of the incidents of Jack Kennedy that I saw him--and I didn't see him much--where I saw that winning charm of his that you cannot deny. He had it; he had it.

G: What do you think was at the root of the animosity between LBJ and Bobby Kennedy?

D: I think it was Bobby's intense desire to run the country. Even under Jack Kennedy I think he ran it more than people knew and probably more than people can document. Then of

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course when Jack Kennedy died he had all of his ambition rising plus all of the vengeance and the hate that I talked about at the meeting in Virginia. It's been documented in history that his daddy said one time, "Bobby's the only son I've got mean enough to be president." And I think that was Bobby's whole philosophy in life and I think the old man probably influenced him in his thinking that way. Lyndon Johnson was the big rock in the road ahead of him. Yes, sir, I think that's what it was. I think that he was behind all of the cuttings against LBJ so naturally LBJ resented him and there was a, I started to say, a silent tug-of-war. It wasn't so silent at times it went on but it was very intense, silent or not silent. But LBJ--there were times I was around him--talked very little about it, very little about it. In other words, it was a problem that in his mind he didn't have any solution for it, so why waste time just talking about it and agitating it when you didn't have an outline path to follow?

G: Was there ever any attempt on the part of either man to try to smooth over the problems between them and--?

D: Not that I know of. You see, cabinet meetings and things like that, I had no first hand information about what went on there. Lyndon Johnson told me many things but I'm sure there were a lot of things he never related to me. So I have no knowledge of any--I read a story about some fellow who wrote a book not long ago about Bobby being down to the Ranch and LBJ and--

G: A. W. Moursund?

D: A. W. Moursund getting him out there and tricking him into shooting a gun that knocked him down. As far as I know--you may know about this and I tried to find out--I don't know

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of any instance where Bobby Kennedy ever went to the LBJ Ranch. Now Jack Kennedy was down there and Jack Kennedy shot a deer but the fellow who wrote this story--it was a movie I believe or a monologue or something like that. I don't think that story is true. Is it or do you know?

(Interruption)

D: There were many other things that happened during Johnson's--the latter part of his tenure in the White House that was manipulated by the Kennedy cult. About that time they were building the football stadium in Washington which of course, being in the District of Columbia, it's a public building. And the question came up--several suggestions about naming it. Mr. Stewart Udall was the secretary of the interior, a Kennedy appointee who Johnson held over I believe and he sure stayed during the entire term. Some of them resigned along the road but not Mr. Stewart Udall.

But to show you his devotion to the Kennedy cult--the naming of the stadium was a prerogative of the Department of Interior. Stewart Udall was the secretary of the interior. They waited until the day before Johnson left office and announced--and I think I'm right in this--without ever checking with the President that the name of the new stadium would be the RFK Stadium. It's there now and it's in operation and I thought that was the crowning humiliating insult that they saved [it] until the last day. Of course President Johnson wasn't going to rescind it on his last day in office and they knew that but they wanted so they would have no outward opposition in naming it and Mr. Stewart Udall is the man who did that. He was the top man. And that's just an example--a big, wide example--of the way

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they operated, the way the Kennedy cult operated. I thought it was ill called for to do it on his last day in office.

(Interruption)

G: Any insights on the other Kennedy cabinet holdovers?

D: Well, I never saw a lot of them and I can only give you an impression on one or two that I have strong impressions of. He thought that McNamara, whom I discussed earlier here, was a genius and that he was a very knowledgeable man and he had a great admiration for his ingeniousness. And as I said earlier, he followed him all the way through. He admired him. I don't think he ever felt closeness to McNamara, and I'm not sure why, but he did have a great respect for his ability.

The only other one that I remember a lot about was Dean Rusk. His attitude toward Dean Rusk, as I recall it, was entirely different from McNamara. He trusted Dean Rusk, not only for his ability, but his integrity, his staunch support of whatever he believed in, yet his willingness to share his feelings and to compromise with his leader. However, I think in most all foreign affairs, from the time I moved to Washington to the day that President Johnson left, that he leaned on Dean Rusk's decisions for many, many things. I think if he would have ranked his people for his confidence and his love for them, Dean Rusk probably would have stood way ahead at the lead. There were others who came along later.

The secretary of the treasury--what am I trying to say—Sawyer? No.

G: Joe Fowler?

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D: Fowler, yes. He had a great respect and admiration for Joe Fowler. I don't think his personal feelings went as deep as it did for Dean Rusk. But he was very fond of Joe Fowler.

If I ever heard him express any negative feeling about any of his cabinet members, I can't recall it. I don't think he did.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview VIII

