INTERVIEWEE: CHARLES DIGGS

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

March 13, 1969

M: Let's begin, sir, by identifying you. You're Charles Diggs, a member of the House of Representatives from the State of Michigan, where you've served consecutively since 1955, I believe. Is that correct?

D: Elected in 1954.

M: Right. How well did you get a chance to know Mr. Johnson in the period when he was still leader of the Senate and you were a young Congressman?

D: I had occasion to needle him many times because at that time he was a Senator from Texas, and not President. I felt that he wasn't moving in certain areas of concern to me in the fashion that I thought he should move, particularly being the Majority Leader and presumably the one who was supposed to implement the party platform. I recall matters pertaining to Rule 22, the filibuster rule, and getting civil rights legislation going over there. I got quite impatient. I recall sending some rather abrasive letters to the gentleman, and I had some of his aides call up to try to mollify me, I guess you would call it. So that was really about the extent of my contact with him prior to his assuming the Presidency.

M: Did he work close personally with members of the House? Did you get a chance to talk to him in conferences regarding the position that you had in the House of Representatives, or did it have to be through his staff pretty much?

D: I never talked to him personally about these matters. As a matter of

fact, I don't recall--other than just seeing him on some occasions and exchanging normal greetings--I did not have any opportunity to actually talk to him until he became President.

I had one contact which took place through an exchange of communications during the time he was Vice President. That was regarding a bank charter that got hung up in the bureaucratic morass out in Houston--the Riverside National Bank, which was the first black bank in the State of Texas. The resident agent, who was a friend of mine--Dr. Edward Irons, who was a graduate of Harvard University with a Ph.D. in economics, but who was a Texan--told me of his problems, and I said, being the political animal I am, the first thing I said was, "Have you contacted the Vice President? I'm sure he would be interested in associating himself with a project of this character."

He said, "No, I hadn't thought about it." So I proceeded to write the Vice President, telling him about their problem and so on. Within a very short period of time, doors that had been locked just opened up, and they got their charter. I had the very delightful experience of joining in with the Deputy Controller of the Currency, who also was a Texan, at the grand opening of the Riverside National Bank in Houston.

M: You had the distinct impression that some of those doors opened because Mr. Johnson had decided to help get them open.

D: I'm reasonably certain of it.

M: Did his presence on the 1960 Democratic ticket cause you any difficulty in your district with your liberal and black constitutency?

D: If so, it was minimal. I can recall prior to the national convention when he was a candidate for President that he sent some people up to

Michigan and into Detroit to try to stimulate some interest in his behalf, but they weren't too successful. There was just a normal prejudice against Southerners in that capacity, which has existed in this country ever since, I guess, the Civil War. Really about the only black friend he had was Hobart Taylor, who at that time was assistant prosecutor of Wayne County in charge of the Civil Division--who is a Texan, and a very prominent Texan--

M: Later appointed to a position up here.

D: Taylor is very prominent, and he had a reception at his house to entertain the representatives of Johnson. Everybody was polite, but I don't think they ever got anywhere there.

Of course, I was a delegate to the national convention, and I can recall there was a considerable amount of reservation about him in the number two spot. As a matter of fact, when I finally went to bed the night before the announcement was made about Kennedy's choice of Johnson for his running mate, I was pretty much assured that Stu Symington was going to be the Vice Presidential candidate. Since I was a preconvention supporter of Symington, I felt pretty good about that. When the announcement was made to the Michigan caucus, the reaction to it obviously was adverse to Johnson. But we went ahead and supported the ticket. The way we approached it was by just concentrating on Kennedy and not mentioning Johnson too much.

M: He didn't campaign in Michigan, did he?

D: He didn't campaign in Michigan. Of course after the election was over with, I don't think there was too much mention of it because everybody

was so happy to get Kennedy that they didn't think too much about the number two spot.

But I do recall that there was a caucus of the black delegates to the national convention the next day after the selections had been made, and both Kennedy and Johnson came down. It was one of the first groups that they talked to because they knew that there was a great deal of reservation about Johnson. I recall him saying that he had confidence in Johnson. Then Johnson took the floor and made quite a persuasive speech. He said, "Just give me a chance. I won't let you down. I'll do more for you in four years in the field of civil rights than you've experienced in the last hundred years." I recall that this was reassuring, but I'm sure that there were people there that still had their fingers crossed about him. Then, of course, all of us had the happy experience of how he did proceed to keep that commitment, and even a larger one beyond even the wildest dreams of anybody that had any reservations about him.

M: It's perhaps good to continue on with that. Can you make sort of a general estimate as to how well he kept that commitment, now that he's out of office and you can see exactly what the sum accomplishment was?

D: I would say just flatly that he not only kept the commitment, but he exceeded the expectations of even his harshest critics in this field. I think it continued the kind of momentum that was established in the election of Kennedy in eliminating a categorical kind of prejudice. Before Kennedy was elected, there was a great deal of anti-Catholic prejudice, in the country about a figure for that post, and Kennedy eliminated that prejudice. Johnson, in keeping his commitment in being

a President for all the people, I think, went a long, long way toward eliminating just a general prejudice against any southerner that might be a candidate for that office, and certainly ought to be given full credit for the role that he played in that regard.

M: Do you think that he really understood the problems of the urban black population?

D: He certainly gave every indication of understanding it. I think he broadened it. I think people began to understand through his programming that the problems that face black people in this country are not just civil rights--that they're economic in character. I think he understood this. I think he pursued the resolution of the problem facing black people on a broader basis when he attempted to do something about jobs and something about housing and something about education, which represented some of the basic problems that fact black people in addition to of course pursuing changes in our Voting Rights Act to protect them in their desire to--. He could see that through the instrumentality of the Voting Rights Act and job protection and education improvement and broadening the available housing, that he was contributing to the advancement of everybody--certainly the underprivileged--but since Negroes are such a large part of the underprivileged, they automatically are the recipients of these kinds of programs.

M: What about his relations with various civil rights leaders of importance? Do you have any insights into who he got along well with, or paid attention to, among the black community--the ones who were leaders of the various organizations?

D: I'm not aware that he had any special problems with any of them. Certainly in

the early beginning of his career. Now later in his career when the Vietnamese war got heated up leadership of people who were aggrieved about our involvement there became disenchanted with him and were critical of him. But even in those instances, there was alwayssome recognition given to him for the advancements that we made on a domestic level so that it was sort of a selective kind of criticism. He enjoyed good rapport, so far as I've been able to understand, with the black leadership across the country in general.

M: Did he have any communications with any of the younger, more militant leadership that might be a little further to the left than some of the more traditional ones?

D: The Administration's contact was across-the-board. However, I'm not aware of any in that category that had any particular rapport with the President.

M: I was just wondering if some, like the Carmichaels, for example, did they ever get a case told to the President? Was there ever any means of communicating from that group?

D: I'm not aware if that group ever had any direct contact with the President.

M: Did you work closely with the White House, or with the White House staff, in any of the major civil rights laws that were passed during his Administration?

D: I worked with a group that worked with the White House--that is, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, which is sort of a council or organization composed of those that are directly involved, the NAACP

and the Urban League, the labor movement and so on. They are the people that were the principal lobbyists here in the capital for civil rights legislation, generally under the leadership of Clarence Mitchell, who is the Washington representative of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Of course they had their direct contacts, so it wasn't necessary to take up the time of the White House or duplicate the communication that was already established through that instrument.

M: Did Mr. Johnson have pretty effective staff people who were in touch with congressmen such as yourself on issues of this kind?

D: Oh yes. Barefoot Sanders was, I guess, the top contact from the Johnson Administration.

M: You felt like if you wanted to get a message over there that you could get it over there?

D: No problem. I had no problem of communication at all.

M: What about the 1967 riots in Detroit, which is one of the districts from Detroit? Did you work with the White House closely during that interlude at all?

D: Yes. As a matter of fact, I can recall a very interesting incident that happened the first night. I think it was the first or second night when the question was whether the federal troops should be brought in. The White House was in a real bind on this for various reasons. Of course Romney was governor, and he had requested it, but the White House

had not reacted. I'm sure there were political considerations. I had been out in the field all day long--ever since about eight that morning--and I thought I had a pretty fair assessment of the situation.

M: By the field, you mean in Detroit?

D: Actually in the riot area, touring the streets. I had concluded that troops were necessary because I thought the situation was getting out of hand, not only on the part of the rioters, if you want to use that expression, but I felt that the police were showing evidence of insufficiency. I felt that the presence of federal troops would be a mitigating factor in here--not only as it relates to the public, but also as it relates to the police--because I thought they would be a more dispassionate instrument in this whole situation.

I recall about ten or eleven o'clock at night after getting some additional reports on this matter, getting quite concerned about the hesitancy of the White House. I got a telephone call which reinforced this belief. I called the White House and told them of my concern. I didn't mince any words, and I didn't try to be diplomatic about it. I just said that, "If you don't send federal troops in here, then the blood that's spilled is going to be on the hands of the White House." Well, that's pretty strong language. But that's what I said. Of course, you know they got pretty excited on the other end that I'd be talking that way, but this is the kind of language that I was compelled to use.

Well, the upshot of it was, thirty minutes later they made a decision to send the troops in. That was the end of that because I just said flatly, "The only reason you're not sending troops in is because of the fact that Romney has asked for them, and there's some kind of political

implication here. You're trying to let Romney use the National Guard--the local guard--and take the responsibility for it, and you don't want to take the responsibility of bringing federal troops in in case anything happens." So that's how that--

M: Did you ever talk to Mr. Johnson directly about that episode later? By that time, you were already, through you activities in foreign affairs, one of the well-known critics of the policy in Viet Nam. Regarding your foreign affairs service and work on that committee, was there some specific episode in regard to Viet Nam or some specific thing that the Administration did or failed to do that led you or compelled you to take the position opposing the policy in Viet Nam?

D: I don't know whether I could be flatly categorized as just in general opposed to the Administration policy. I thought we could have been more creative in this area, particularly as relates to stopping the bombing. I thought this would have encouraged some negotiations. This, of course, ultimately was what we did. I was one of the principal advocates of the "Ban the Bomb" comments petitions. This is about where it stood.

M: Weren't you one of the sponsors of a meeting in early '67 that ultimately issued a report calling for both the stopping of the bombing and the recognition of the NLF as the bargaining belligerents?

D: Not as recognition, but certainly that they ought to be included in any kind of negotiations. We did hold some public seminars on this subject here in Washington and at Wayne State University in Detroit, which is in my district. I thought that the public was not as informed as they should be, and secondly, the public needed an outlet to express themselves.

We conducted these informal hearings so that people who were for or opposed to it could have an outlet. We think that it was very, very useful.

M: Did you ever get a reaction from the White House on that?

D: No, not that I can recall. I was not as public in my opposition on this. I signed petitions and so on, and I stated my position to those that wrote in. But I didn't take the stump and was not as public as, say Senator Morse or Fulbright or somebody like that.

In a sense you might call it playing down my opposition because, having been exposed in executive session to testimony from the Secretary of State, from the Secretary of Defense, from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and other Administration officials, I had a different perspective about this thing. I knew that there were some aspects of it that were legitmately subject to criticism, but there were some that were not. I believed that our national interest was involved in Viet Nam. So, therefore, I wasn't about to get out there with some frontal attack against us being in there in the first place, and that we ought to pull out altogether, that we had no national interest in what happens in Southeast Asia. I was convinced that we did have, and do have a national interest.

M: Did you ever think that there was any punishment directed at you, either in your district politically or in Washington in any way because of your signed petitions and sponsoring a seminar and so on in opposition to policy?

D: No, not at all.

M: No vindictiveness that you could--

D: Not at all.

M: Do you think that the people in Congress who opposed the policy being followed there got through to Mr. Johnson? Do you think he ever listened to them?

D: I'm sure he listened, but I don't think that he was too much influenced by opinions that were expressed in the Congress. Having been a member himself of the House and the Senate, he pretty much knows what may motivate a member to make criticisms. Sometimes members make criticisms publicly that they don't really support privately. You know, he makes an assessment of this sort of thing as to whether or not this is something serious or not. Every time it was tested in terms of appropriations and so on--in terms of the original resolution, the Tonkin Resolution--it was overwhelmingly supported, certainly substantially supported by the membership. He pointed this out, time and time again, in denying that there was a majority opinion in the country that was demending that we pull out of Viet Nam. This was not the case.

M: The press talked about a credibility gap, but they were talking about public knowledge. Do you think that he kept the Congress adequately informed about what the realities of the situation there were and what our policy was at all times?

D: He certainly provided many opportunities for the Administration to defend their stand. He had members of Congress in groups over to the White House. He instructed appropriate officials to make themselves available for explanations with respect to the Administration's policy. There were some people who, despite all of this information, still didn't feel that we were on the right track. Of course there was a lot of information that

he, for security reasons, couldn't share even with members of the Foreign Affairs and Armed Services Committees. But when you're in a wartime situation, these security considerations are very important.

M: I'm coming down here without two minutes to my deadline which I intend to make. Your work also has been very largely with the District Committee. Are there any episodes where you had occasion to get insight into Mr. Johnson's operation with the District Committee, particularly perhaps in the defeat of home rule in 1965, which I think occurred in the House committee?

D: I think that the President had the proper attitude toward the District. I think he tried to build upon the foundation that was established by President Kennedy, who was really the first President to really embrace the District problems for the first time. You know, he was the one that appointed Charlie Horsky as the White House liaison. That was the first time that that happened. Johnson built upon this foundation. In coming up with the Reorganization Act Plan which brought a mayor-commissioner and a mayor-council form of government here, I think that he amply displayed his concerns.

M: You think he did put full legislative effort into it even though he didn't always--?

D: Oh yes, the reorganization plan, I think, is Exhibit A of his interests. Then I do know that they--meaning the Administration--exercised his influence to get that one through; and also to get some other things that we were able to get through in terms of District legislation that had not come to pass before.

M: Before we stop, are there any subjects on which you had contact that you

think should be mentioned that I don't have any way of knowing about--any episodes that you feel are important? I don't want to cut you off here even though we're getting down to the wire.

D: I think the President left a great legacy for future Presidents to concern themselves about the whole question of equal opportunities. He made a tremendous contribution to it, and I think he will always be respected for it. There's no question in my mind that he was the most effective President that we've ever had with respect to that subject. I think the kind of momentum that he established is going to be very difficult to reverse, particularly because he raised the level of aspirations and the hopes of people. We may have people who are less committed than he in the White House, but I'm sure that they're going to be very hesitant about reversing trends, at least.

M: Hopefully then, they have learned better than to try.

D: Yes.

M: It's certainly nice of you to have us in the middle of a busy afternoon, Congressman Diggs. I appreciate it.

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By Charles C. Diggs, Jr.

to the

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