INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 8, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: O. C. FISHER

INTERVIEWER: DOROTHY PIERCE McSWEENY

PLACE: Congressman Fisher's office, 2407 Rayburn Building, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

Mc: Congressman, I'd like to begin the interview with a very brief outline of the dates of your career so that we may relate this period of service with Mr. Johnson.

Your public service began in 1931 as county attorney of Tom Green County in Texas. From 1935 to 1937 you were a state representative; from 1937 to 1943 you were a district attorney of the 51st Judicial District in Texas; and in 1942 you were elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from the Twenty-First District of Texas, and of course successfully re-elected since. You are a member of the House Armed Services Committee and chairman of Sub-committee No. 4 and of Sub-committee on the Central Intelligence Agency.

F: No, I'm not chairman of the latter. I'm a member.

Mc: No, just a member of that one. Do I essentially have the correct background information, though very brief?

F: Correct. Yes.

Mc: Sir, have you ever participated in any other oral history project of this type?

F: No, I have not.

Mc: All right. Mr. Congressman, you are a very long-standing member of the Texas delegation. You sat in the House with Lyndon Johnson for about six years, and you have continuously, of course, been involved in the political scene through Mr. Johnson's election to the Senate and to the vice presidency and the presidency. Also, I believe that you are the representative from the district where Lyndon Johnson's Ranch is located.

F: Correct. Gillespie County, where the LBJ Ranch is located, is in the Twenty-First District.

Mc: With this sort of background, when did you first meet Mr. Johnson?

F: I first met Lyndon Johnson in January of 1943 on the day that I was sworn in as a member of the House of Representatives.

Mc: Do you recall very much about the occasion, first impressions in meeting Mr. Johnson?

F: Oh, really, I don't recall any of the details. I was a new member, my first trip to Washington. I met all of the Texas members, of whom there were twenty-one, including myself, at the time. I met all of them, probably, on the opening day of the session. I'm sure I did. That included Mr. Rayburn and many senior members. My recollections about Mr. Johnson in particular are rather hazy at this time. I do recall that he was a rather prominent member of the delegation and I, therefore, was somewhat attracted to him out of curiosity, having read a lot about him, but never having had the privilege of meeting him before that time.

Mc: Do you recall any thoughts of what his reputation was, in your mind, when you met him? In other words, a comparison of them?

F: No, nothing in particular. He had been in a statewide campaign for U.S. senator. He had run again Pappy [W. Lee] O'Daniel for U.S. senator before that, and his efforts were unsuccessful, you will recall. It was a very close margin of victory for O'Daniel. Perhaps not too close, because he was running pretty high in public favor at that time--O'Daniel was. But anyway, out of that campaign, Mr. Johnson became a statewide figure. I'd read a lot about him, as all Texans had who had not seen him. We didn't have television in those days, so we depended on the radio, newspapers and direct view to acquaint ourselves with appearances. And it happened that I had not seen Mr. Johnson until I came to Congress.

Mc: What was Mr. Johnson's relationship with members of the Texas delegation?

F: Apparently, he was quite popular and respected among the members.

Mc: Whom did you see as his close friends?

F: His closest friends, I would say, from my viewpoint, were Sam Rayburn and Wright Patman. I'm sure there were others; he was quite friendly with Paul Kilday and George Mahon--those in particular, I think.

Mc: Did you become associated with Speaker Rayburn and the "Board of Education," as it is called?

F: No, I would not say that I was included in that rather exclusive group.

Mc: How would you describe your relations with Mr. Johnson?

F: Rather casual. We had some things in common dealing with REA, with problems relating to mohair, I recall, on occasions, and [with] a number of things pertaining to the ranching industry, where we had problems that were identical. So we collaborated on occasion regarding those things.

Mc: About how often did you see him during his House membership days?

F: Well, as I recall, he was a rather regular attendant at the session; he missed very few roll calls in those days. And I missed very few. So that means that I saw him practically every legislative day.

Mc: Do you recall anything particular about Mr. Johnson as a representative, in his position in the membership of the House with you?

F: Well, it's difficult to pick out anything in particular. He was not a crusader, as I would class him, for any particular cause. He did not participate in debates to speak of, except those relating to bills out of the Armed Services Committee--that is, during the earlier years that I knew him in the Congress. I'm sure he was quite active on the Armed Services Committee in those days and confined most of his activity in terms of participation in debate to bills coming out of that committee.

Mc: Did he appear to enjoy his position as a member of the House of

Representatives?

F: I'm sure he did. I saw nothing to the contrary. I always had a feeling that he was a little restless and perhaps looking for bigger worlds to conquer, even in those days. He had already made his move for the Senate unsuccessfully, and I have an idea that he was looking forward to another opportunity of that type, although he never told me that. I'm just assuming that he was setting his sails in that direction.

Mc: Did you have occasion to ask for his advice, seeing that he had seniority?

F: I probably did a few times, but if so, it was very rarely, and if at all, I assume it related to REA matters. It happened that the old Pedernales Electric Cooperative--which was close to his heart--headquarters at Johnson City became too large, almost unmanageable it was so large, it had expanded so extensively. It was one of the original co-ops in Texas. And it was split, with the lines being drawn between his district and mine, generally, with a Central Texas Co-op, a new one being created out of the Pedernales, with headquarters in Fredericksburg. So in working out that split, the division of lines and obligations of each co-op, I conferred with him a number of times, with groups of REA directors and managers and attorneys, because there were some legal complexities involved. And looking back, those meetings were among the first that I can recall with Mr. Johnson in which I had opportunity to deal directly with him.

Mc: Was he easy to work with?

F: Oh, yes, he was a compromiser type. If we ran into roadblocks, he would usually come up with alternatives and was quite effective in being able to resolve difficulties and differences that arose. We were all shooting for the same objective, anyhow, so it wasn't too difficult.

Mc: Did he have any occasion to seek your support for legislation that he was sponsoring?

F: I don't recall that he did.

Mc: Was the Texas delegation pretty much together on most of their voting?

F: No, there was always a division in the delegation. When I came to Congress, the delegations was much more conservative, as that word is generally understood, than it is today, for example. There were many senior members, such as Fritz Lanham, Hatton Sumners, Milton West, Mr. [Joseph] Mansfield; Ed Gossett was there; oh, any number of others I could name who were rather independent in their voting habits, and they were predominant in the delegation in those days. So on issues relating to so-called liberal spending and so forth, and New Deal politics and the like, I associated myself with the so-called conservative wing of the delegation. It's not quite fair, I suppose, to call it a wing. We were united on many things, particularly those relating to the welfare of Texas, but in the broad terms of conservatism as opposed to liberalism, the delegation when I came to Congress was

predominantly conservative; that is, probably two to one in that proportion. And I think generally Mr. Johnson would have been classified with the so-called liberal element, as it existed in those days.

Mc: And this would, of course, include Speaker Rayburn, too?

F: That's correct.

Mc: Would this be one of the reasons why you didn't become closer to him, since you were so close as far as your districts were [concerned]?

F: Well, no, there's no particular reason; there was no particular occasion. We had no differences. I got along well with Mr. Johnson throughout the time he served in the House and while he was in the Senate. We probably disagreed on some of the issues, but we were together on many of them. For example, when the Taft-Hartley Act came along, it was highly controversial. It was fought bitterly by organized labor. I was on the Labor Committee, in those days, which I helped draft, or I had at least a small part in the drafting of that legislation. Lyndon Johnson supported the Taft-Hartley Act, whereas, Sam Rayburn did not. He made a speech against it. So Johnson was not hidebound to the so-called liberal side. He was flexible on occasions, as indicated by his action in supporting the Taft-Hartley Act. I might add that I think, generally speaking, over the state of Texas at that time, that was the popular position to be, and I'm sure Johnson thought so.

Mc: This particular vote that you're talking about, didn't it cause

him a little trouble in the 1948 election for the Senate against Coke Stevenson?

F: That is correct, and I have an idea that it resulted in his election. I think it contributed very directly toward overcoming the resistance he would otherwise have had from a considerable number of conservatives, who might not have supported him had he voted against the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act.

Mc: Do you recall very much about this election? It was quite controversial at the time.

F: It was quite controversial. And Coke Stevenson, who was then ex-governor, was a constituent of mine from the county of my birth. I'd known him all my life up at Junction where I went through high school, and he lived nearby. He had begun his career in politics there as county attorney and state representative, speaker of the House and then governor of the state. I had very high respect for Governor Stevenson, and I, for that reason, naturally followed the campaign more than one ordinarily would, I suppose. I, however, for obvious reasons, took no personal part in it. But I do recall that it was a very exciting campaign, and the outcome of it was quite uncertain. And, of course, the ultimate outcome was shrouded in a certain amount of controversy because of the famous Box 13 down in Duval County.

Mc: What was your opinion of the election? Was there any unfair practices or questionable practices?

F: Well, it would be very unkind and improper for me to pass judgment on that, because I simply did not know firsthand. Anything I would

say would be based on sheer hearsay, and I don't think that would contribute anything to history. But there were suspicions.

Mc: Well, let me just ask you: did you think yourself that Governor Stevenson would win the election? Were you surprised?

F: I think most Texans thought so, and I think many of Johnson's staunchest supporters thought so. As I recall, in the first primary, in that campaign, Coke Stevenson led by some 75,000, which was a very substantial lead. And Lyndon Johnson had a great deal to overcome in picking up the votes that were necessary. Of course, in run-offs the voting pattern is usually different, because not as many people vote in run-offs. And I think, as I recall, Lyndon Johnson made the maximum use of his vote on the Taft-Hartley Act during that run-off campaign, which may very well have spelled the difference between winning and losing.

Mc: Before we leave his congressional days, does anything particularly stand out in your mind about Lyndon Johnson as a congressman, and would you tell how you would rate him?

F: He was a fairly effective member dealing with those subjects in which he specialized, particularly matters of national defense. He was a very close associate of the chairman of the committee, Mr. Vinson, Carl Vinson. He was a ranking member on the committee in those days. I don't recall any particular controversies where he played a dominant role, but I do recall that his views were sought after and respected by many members, because of his relationship to the committee and his position on it.

Mc: Did you have any occasion to sort of deal with Mr. Johnson or his staff in relation to what was happening back with your constituencies--post offices and things like that?

F: On occasions I did. Usually my dealings were with John Connally when he was his secretary--and a very, very effective one. I recall on occasions when the mohair growers were in difficulty down in Texas, and we had a series of meetings in an effort to find a solution to a problem that was very difficult regarding mohair. Lyndon attended at least one or two of those meetings in my office. John Connally attended more and was quite effective. That's where I learned to respect John Connally. I learned then that he was just two or three jumps ahead of most of us in terms of understanding and grasping of problems and their solutions--not that he had any superior judgment, but he was always coming up with very pertinent, very timely ideas that we could always explore and sometimes help provide the solutions.

Mc: Sort of the area I was aiming at was that in relationship to his constituency at home, he was very careful to always try to, you know, get the publicity and do things for his district. And I was wondering, I'd heard some stories that he was very competitive about getting the jump on other members of the delegation in announcing things for Texas.

F: I think, Mrs. McSweeny, you're probably thinking more of that apparent conflict--I remember seeing it crop up myself--after he

went to the Senate and, perhaps, even while he was Vice president, where announcements were made on occasions that irritated some of the Texas members to some extent. Not that there's any particular basis for criticism, as I see it, but it's one of those family things that would naturally arise, I suppose, in dealing with postmasterships and new post offices and appointments of various people where the House members might feel they were entitled to equal publicity in making the announcement. Nothing like that ever affected me in my case, but I do recall at Texas delegation meetings where the question was raised a time or two.

Mc: Sir, what do you recall about Mr. Johnson's very rapid rise to leadership position in the Senate?

F: I'm not too familar with the Senate set-up. He was very fortunate in moving into a situation where there was a change in the air. The position of assistant leader, which he grabbed shortly after he went there, was up for grabs, and he was rather astute. Perhaps his competition for the spot was not too heavy, and he knew his way around. He had already made many friends; he had help from Sam Rayburn and other prominent people in the party, and a combination of circumstances played right into his hands. So it would not be too surprising, in terms of history, that the mantle of assistant leader would fall upon him. Then from that, of course, he moved into the other position when the Democratic leader left the Senate a year or two later, two or three years later, maybe.

Mc: Did you see any differences in Mr. Johnson's political philosophy from the period of the House and the Senate days?

F: Well, I couldn't point to anything in particular. He was, of course, far more active and articulate in announcing his position on the issues. Because of his leadership, he had to be. He was leader in the Senate mostly during the time that President Eisenhower, a Republican, was in the White House. And I think, and I'm sure you'd find many sources more reliable than I in that regard, as I recall, his leadership was quite acceptable to President Eisenhower, who felt that Johnson went, if anything, beyond the call of duty in presenting the Eisenhower position and often advocating it in the U.S. Senate during those times.

Mc: Did this create any problem among the Texas delegation--that he seemed to be helping Eisenhower's program?

F: No, I don't think so, because most of the Texas members were very friendly with President Eisenhower. He had carried the state by a margin of two to one and was extremely popular, and all of the Eisenhower policies that I recall were quite moderate and quite acceptable to most Texans.

Mc: There is something written about Mr. Johnson's politics during those days indicating that he was very conservative in his approach and did not come out for civil rights legislation and several of the labor legislations. Do you think this was true?

F: Again, there are other sources that would be more reliable than

anything I could say on that. I do think that history reveals that President Johnson, and former Representative and former Senator Johnson throughout that period of his service gradually became more liberal on civil rights legislation. In the House of Representatives, as I recall, he had opposed the repeal of the poll tax; the repeal of which was advocated by civil rights extremists and moderates, or whatever you want to call them. And I believe--I base this largely on recalling campaign issues since then in which Mr. Johnson was involved--that it's been contended by his opposition since then that he did make quite a change in his attitude as he moved into positions of national responsibility. And when the White House became more within the view of aspirants, as they came and went in those days, he became more friendly toward the more liberal bills relating to civil rights.

Mc: Did you have occasion to see him very often during his Senate days?

F: Oh, yes. He attended most of the Texas delegation luncheons, which were held once each week, every Wednesday at noon in the Speaker's private dining room on the House side. In addition, we, the Texas members who had legislation pending in the Senate relating to flood control, to agricultural bills, and others directly affecting Texas, would have occasion to meet with him from time to time. He was very effective, of course, when he was majority leader of the Senate, and often very helpful. He was very cooperative with the Texas members in that respect.

Mc: Did he appear to sort of be aiming at becoming more associated or identified with being a national Democrat than a southern Democrat?

F: I think so.

Mc: He had a reputation, or gained a reputation, during his majority leadership days, as a wheeler-dealer. Do you recall any events or examples of legislation that really required his very skillful maneuvering to get through?

F: Well, I don't recall anything that would probably symbolize the thought you have in mind. I do know that he could wheel and deal, all right. I don't use those words in any ulterior sense; by that I mean he was effective, astute, and knew how to get the job done.

We had a reclamation project in San Angelo which was somewhat controversial. It was in the House. Well, even before the project had been approved by the Bureau of the Budget, which is a normal condition precedent to taking the bill up in the House or Senate, Lyndon Johnson called it up on the floor and passed it one morning--took about ten minutes, thirty million dollar authorization. I was the author of the bill in the House, and it took me weeks and even months, with bitter opposition, to finally win it by a margin of eleven votes! So you can see that he did have the capacity because of his leadership position to move in and get things done when he wanted to. You might describe that as wheeling and dealing. I don't say that he could do that with regard to any bill, but I mention this as an example, and I think you wanted an example.

Mc: I certainly did. That was a very good one. Do you recall any others like this that really illustrated it?

F: Not at the moment. It was a sound bill. He was certainly performing a proper public service in doing this, although his action was obviously premature. I mention it as an example of how he could move fast and even break precedent, because the Bureau of the Budget at that time hadn't even approved it. That's a technical thing, of course.

Mc: Did you have occasion and, let me say this, in either of his representative or senatorial days, to oppose a piece of legislation that he was at least concerned with, and have him try to talk you out of it, or discuss your opposition to it?

F: He talked with me a few times. I can't recall any particular bill or issue. He called me on the phone a good many times, talked to me about matters, not necessarily legislative, pertaining to civil rights. That was after he was vice president. And after he came to the White House he called me, very few times, I'll add, maybe once or twice actually so far as particular bills were concerned, to discuss his viewpoint and why he felt it was in my interest, his and the state of Texas and all concerned that I change my attitude I had taken regarding a bill.

Mc: Did this ever make you change your mind on something?

F: I remember one in particular--this happened not long after he was installed as president, probably two or three months--when a farm bill that had passed the House and had gone to the Senate came back to the House side. He was very much in favor of the Senate version, as I recall. He called me and told me--from the White

House--talked to me for maybe fifteen minutes, giving me his side of it. And I explained to him that every farm bureau in my district opposed this particular version. I felt that I would be going not only against my own judgment at the time, but also against the prevailing viewpoint of those that this legislation would affect. He expressed the view that those who opposed it in Texas probably didn't understand it very well. And I said, "Well, Mr. President, would you like to go down and explain it to them? You and Bob Poage?"--the ranking Democrat from Texas on the Agricultural Committee. I said, "That's quite an order, you know." And he said, "Oh, well, you talk to Bob about it." And I did. We worked it out. So I ended up voting against the bill. But my vote wouldn't have made any difference anyhow, and we had that understanding.

I liked to cooperate with him when I could in good conscience, you know. You like to do that for the leaders in the House and the Senate when you can in good conscience without violating any commitment you've made to your own constituents or without stultifying your own conscience.

Mc: Were there any occasions where it evoked any strong response from Mr. Johnson that you were going to go along with his legislation?

F: No, I don't recall. I had very little occasion to deal with him directly regarding such things. Usually my relationship was with some of the aides in the White House, so far as legislation was

concerned. I'm talking now about after he became president.

Mc: How would you rate Mr. Johnson as a senator and as a majority leader?

F: Well, I would say he was very effective.

Mc: Before I completely leave the era of the fifties, I'd like to ask you about Mr. Johnson's relationship to politics in the state of Texas. Was he influential in the internal politics?

F: I really don't know. I assume he was, in some local situations. I don't recall that he took very much active part in state races. He was usually active in the national races, as far as the Office of President is concerned, throughout his career. But I don't recall any other activity in particular. That's a long time ago, as it relates to local contests or state politics as distinguished from the national ticket.

Mc: Did you attend the state convention in 1956? There was a sort of power struggle there between liberals and conservatives.

F: No. I must confess, I never attended a state Democratic convention in my life.

Mc: And the governor's convention, too, as I believe it's called, the later one?

F: No, I attended the national convention in Chicago in 1960 when Kennedy was nominated. That's the only one I ever attended. I never

had any desire to attend national conventions or state conventions. I find that I can be of more use to my constituents by sticking on to my specialty as their elected representative, without involving myself very much in conventions.

Mc: Well, of course, the reason I brought that one up in particular was that it was a sort of political struggle within the state of Texas. And I was wondering if you'd had any involvement as far as being an elected member?

F: No, I was on the outside looking in. I remember reading about that.

Mc: Since you mentioned the 1960 convention that you attended and that you did attend that one, can I sort of ask you what you recall about that one? Did you think that Mr. Johnson had a chance to become the nominee in that convention?

F: Well, of course, we held out some hope that he could be nominated when we went out there. Most all of the Texas delegation were delegates. That was part of the plan spearheaded by Sam Rayburn as well as Mr. Johnson, and we were all there doing what little we could, and I can assure you it was very little, under the direction of Price Daniel, who was sort of in charge, in an effort to create more good will on behalf of Lyndon Johnson. As I'm sure history will record, that convention might very well never have been held so far as the results were concerned. I think it was cut and dried: there were too many commitments; too much had

been done by the Kennedys and their powerful organization, well financed, and so it wasn't much of a contest after all. But even at that, Johnson made a very creditable showing. He got a rather substantial number of votes, but very short of having what was necessary to get the nomination, as you know.

Mc: He was very long in announcing, and there's been much talk, of course, that that had an effect, too. Did he ever explain why he would not come out and announce his candidacy for the presidential nomination?

F: I never heard that mentioned. Frankly, I don't think it would have made any difference. It was fighting a tidal wave; the Kennedys had the thing pretty well wrapped up early. They had spent an awful lot of money, and they had enough delegates there that it probably couldn't have been changed no matter when the opposition had made their announcement.

Mc: Did you hear any pre-convention talk about Mr. Johnson being the possible vice presidential nominee?

F: That, as I recall, hadn't been discussed very much. There was considerable amount of opposition to John Kennedy in Texas, as you know. There was talk in the meetings around that they were proposing to send a boy to do a man-sized job. Those old political cliches, you know. And I don't recall that in the Texas delegation meetings the subject was ever mentioned of him possibly being vice president. We were concentrating on the top spot.

Mc: Were you much surprised when you heard that he was going to accept

the number two spot?

F: Well, frankly, I was surprised. Just hadn't occurred to me that he would accept it, because of the very strong effort that was made and the apparent differences between the two that were emphasized during the contest leading up to the nomination of John Kennedy. So I suppose the thought of Johnson accepting it may or may not have been in the back of his mind. I wouldn't know.

Mc: I believe Speaker Rayburn was very much against his accepting it. Did you make any effort to try to dissuade him?

F: No, frankly, after Kennedy was nominated one night, I left for Texas early the next morning. So I wasn't there during that battle for the vice presidency.

Mc: How much importance do you think Mr. Johnson's being on the ticket had in the election?

F: Well, I think it caused Kennedy to be elected. I think he got enough votes [to carry Texas]. I'm sure Kennedy would not have carried Texas had Johnson not been on the ticket. I'm quite confident of that. And the same is probably true of some other southern states. After all, it was a very close race, you know.

Mc: Did you do any particular campaigning for the national ticket during 1960?

F: No, I didn't. I confined my efforts to my own back yard and my own campaigning for myself. I made no statement about the ticket.

Mc: Was there much worry that the ticket might not carry Texas?

F: It was touch and go, it was kind of a toss-up according to the

polls and the views of most people. The fact is: I suppose if you'd looked around, you'd have gotten some pretty good bets that Kennedy would not have carried Texas.

Mc: It would have been kind of bad for Mr. Johnson, wouldn't it?

F: Yes, well, in a sense it would. As it turned out, of course, it wouldn't have been. It probably would have been a good thing for Kennedy in terms of history, because had he not carried Texas, he wouldn't have been elected president. Had he not been elected president, he would probably be alive today. So you never know. It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good.

Mc: Were you, by any chance, in Dallas when--this is pre-election--what is called the Adolphus Hotel incident occurred with, I believe it was Bruce Alger?

F: No, I wasn't there. I read about it.

Mc: I'm about ready to go into the vice presidency here. But there was much talk and much written about the fact that Mr. Johnson did not have a very secure political base in Texas, in part due to what is sometimes called the erraticism of Texas politics and political struggles and in-fighting within the state. What is your opinion of this?

F: It's very difficult to throw any light on that issue. Perhaps his foothold, his strength on the local level was somewhat nebulous, particularly in the earlier years of his career. He was always a little controversial, as nearly all politicians are, and he had been quite active. He had fought two campaigns for the Senate, and

you don't do those things without picking up opposition and creating some old scores that haunt you, those who go through these things, all of which add somewhat to the uncertainty of the extent of the control and the influence over the voters, who are affected by these prior things that take place. So I'm really not very well qualified. As I say, I was never close to the inner circle of the Johnson-Rayburn group, nor was I active on the state level in state politics, or very much on the national level, except as an observer and doing my own limited chores as the occasion arose in my own district. But Johnson, as indicated by his efforts in politics--first Senate race and other contests in which he took a part--was not an overwhelming favorite in a political sense. Yet, he was always recognized as a serious threat, who was well known and who had considerable backing among the press and a good many influential and well-to-do people.

Mc: In any occasion of his being up for election, did you have any conversations with him regarding getting more support for his candidacy?

F: The only time that could have occurred after I came to Congress would have been in the campaign for the Senate against Coke Stevenson. And he never talked with me about that campaign personally. He did talk to the Texas delegation behind closed doors about some of his campaign problems and strategy and so forth. But that was largely in confidence. Nothing significant about it. He never sought me out for advice or assistance in any manner. So

I would say that I probably couldn't have been of any help had I been disposed.

It happened that I had another constituent. Well, he wasn't really a constituent--Johnson wasn't. He was over the line then. But Coke Stevenson was a constituent of mine and a friend of my family, and that pretty well prevented me from involving myself in any event.

Mc: You said that the strategy was discussed in the meetings with the Texas delegation. What was this?

F: Oh, I can't recall anything in particular. It was just sort of a progress report on campaign efforts, particularly after the first primary.

Mc: You've mentioned a couple of times where you did have contact with Mr. Johnson as vice president. Do you recall anything significant about these while he was vice president?

F: No, I don't think so. He was very helpful on occasions. For example, we had a problem of keeping an air base or two open and sought Mr. Johnson's assistance. And he was always very responsive, not necessarily as a means of helping me in particular, but because of some very important and influential friends in my district who shared my concern and who participated in these meetings. We always felt like he would walk an extra mile on those occasions in an attempt to be helpful, and [he] was quite helpful and successful in some of his contributions.

Mc: Did you ever feel or did he ever indicate much frustration from

lack of power in the vice presidential position?

F: I don't think so, so far as I know. It just never occurred to me. I wouldn't be able to add anything to your stock of information on that.

Mc: Did you have any conversation, as a member of the Texas delegation, about the very fateful trip to Texas in November of 1963, by Mr. Kennedy, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson? Did you go over or talk about the Texas part of the trip in November of 1963 that President Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson took?

F: I recall very well that in the fall, probably September, before that trip occurred, maybe October, John Connally, who was then governor, came to Washington. He met with the Texas delegation. He was going from there over to see the Democratic national chairman.

I don't suppose I'm violating any confidence when I say that, as I recall it, the Governor thought it much better for Kennedy to postpone this trip, which was then being talked about, to Texas, at least until after the first of the year. He didn't think the political climate was particularly desirable from the standpoint of results. Of course, that was not based on any fear that anything bad would happen to him. That, I'm sure, never occurred to him or any other Texan until it did happen. But I do know that at one time--he may have changed later--

John Connally had very serious misgivings about the timing for that trip to Texas by the President.

Mc: Was it felt in the delegation that this was a necessary political fence-mending type of trip, or was it just more or less a routine fund raising?

F: It was quite obvious that John Kennedy was in considerable difficulty politically in Texas at that time. Bobby Kennedy, the attorney general, was extremely unpopular in Texas at that time, very muchly so. And the same kind of rubbed off on his brother John to a certain extent, as I remember it.

I recall, for example, if this be of any interest to you, that in August before the November tragedy, I sent a questionnaire to every voter in my district. At the bottom of it, as a sort of an afterthought, I added this: "If you care to express an opinion, who among the following would you prefer to be president of the United States or to be elected in the next election?" And I listed those whose names were then in the news. First, of course, was the President, Kennedy; Goldwater, Romney, and Rockefeller. Those were the ones who were prominently mentioned as of that time. Of course, Johnson wasn't mentioned. He was vice president, and he wasn't in the picture so far as being a candidate for president. The results were

revealed that Kennedy, as I recall, got about 11 per cent of the votes. Goldwater got about 64 per cent. Romney got about 14 per cent, and Rockefeller got around 10 or something like that. I mention that only as an indication of the political atmosphere, at least in my part of Texas, preceding the time when it was decided that Kennedy be sent to Texas. That apparently was the judgment of the Democratic national chairman, and I don't know which others participated in making that decision. It was generally agreed, I think, that it was in order for him to make a trip to Texas. But the question of timing was debated by some, including Governor Connally.

Mc: Was Mr. Johnson's popularity affected by his association with the Kennedys?

F: Well, I would assume that it would, in a manner of speaking, naturally. Your guess about that would, of course, be as good as mine.

Mc: Did you pass this information along to anybody connected with the White House?

F: Which information?

Mc: On the polls that [were on your questionnaire].

F: Oh, yes. I inserted it in the Congressional Record so everybody could read it.

Mc: Did you, by any chance, go along on this trip at all?

F: I went to San Antonio--that was the first stop--in a presidential plane which preceded the Air Force One. We were there on the ground when Kennedy landed. I was there when he landed. That was

the day before he was assassinated. And I rode in the parade out to the project where he dedicated a building. I think that related to NASA.

Mc: The medical center?

F: Medical center, that's right. And then I was back at the airport when he took off for Houston. But I had private business in Laredo, and I was met by a friend of mine who took me to Laredo that night. It was on my way from Laredo back north the next day that I learned about the tragedy.

Mc: Did you have any immediate talks with Mr. Johnson very soon after the assassination?

F: No. I had no particular conversations with him. I, of course, saw him. He came to the Texas delegation a time or two not long after that, and he invited us, most of the members for that matter, to the White House not long after that. No private conversations took place between me and Mr. Johnson. I was just another member of the delegation who happened to be there because of that fact.

Mc: What did he say to the members of the Texas delegation?

F: I don't remember, now, anything in particular. He was very anxious to have the good will and support, as far as the members could give it, in advancing his image and promoting his success in the White House.

[The following insert was made by Congressman Fisher in reviewing the transcript in October 1978. It is of course not on the tape recording.]

F: I recall an incident that occurred on Air Force One, on Christmas Eve a month after Johnson had been sworn in. The President had invited

the Texas delegation to hitchhike a ride with him to Austin, at the end of the session of Congress, and there were ten or fifteen of us who took that ride. During the flight we were called into the bedroom and the President stood in the door and delivered quite a lecture on his need for congressional help from Texas members. He told us, "You guys are very unlucky having a president from Texas because it would be easier for you to oppose a president if he were from some other state." He went on to say that his administration would be judged, in a sense, by the amount of support he got from his own fellow Texans.

He made quite a speech to us. And two or three times he pointed his finger toward us and said: "Remember, as you do your voting, I am going to do more for you than you do for me." He added that there probably would be occasions when we would be called on to cast votes not necessarily popular among our constituents, but he felt we would want to cooperate with a president from Texas.

[End of insert. Regular interview resumes.]

Mc: I did mean to ask you: did you continue on back to Washington on November 22?

F: Oh, yes. I came back the following day.

Mc: This is getting up into, more or less, very recent times. I wanted to kind of shift to Congress and the much legislative activity in recent years. The Congress under Mr. Kennedy, John Kennedy, was said to be uncooperative and unproductive. And at the same time, 1964 and 1965, there was a tremendous flood of legislation that did get passage. To what would you attribute these two rather analogous events?

F: Well, I suppose there were a few changes made in the Congress during that period. Lyndon Johnson, after his election, after filling out the unexpired term of Kennedy, of course, came in in a tremendous landslide of votes which probably enhanced his influence and his ability to get Congress to follow his views on legislative matters. Most of his accomplishments in terms of bills passed, I believe, took place after he was elected, rather than during the interim between the time of the assassination and the next election.

Mc: Well, let me back up. To what would you attribute the fact that Mr. Kennedy, John Kennedy, had not had passage of many of his programs?

F: Well, in the first place, he didn't have the leadership and control over Congress. It was more difficult, I think, for him to sell himself and his program, and they came with some rather novel ones. I think he was somewhat handicapped by some unpopular people in his administration, and no one was particularly excited about some of his New Frontier proposals. I can't recall the

details of what bills he was sponsoring.

A good many of them turned out to be Great Society proposals after Johnson went in. That's particularly true with reference to poverty and civil rights and immigration. He wanted to take the quota limitation off of immigration, and proposed it, as I recall. Johnson got it done after he went in. But not with my vote. It was incubating at the time. Kennedy was planning, or it was announced that he was proposing a massive drive against so-called poverty, and Johnson picked up that issue and ran with it. Kennedy had proposed certain civil rights measures. Johnson picked that up. And I have an idea, had Kennedy lived, he would have gotten some of these through anyhow.

But Johnson picked up much of the New Frontier program, embellished it or expanded it, and came up with some others, I'm sure, if you go down the line and count them all. So he was able to cash in, we'll say, on the progress that Kennedy had made on certain proposals by certain groundwork having been laid, certain commitments having been made in support of them.

You understand that I'm probably not the best judge in the world of this, because it happens that I was opposed to most all of these things at the time, both under Kennedy and under Johnson.

Mc: Could Mr. Johnson have helped him in his vice presidential spot more with the Congress that he was so familiar with?

F: You mean more than he actually did?

Mc: Would it have helped to get it in, or did he?

F: Well, I'm sure he was cooperative with the President during the

period, particularly in the Senate. But I don't recall any special efforts that he made, as applied to me, in behalf of legislation proposed by the Kennedys. He may have mentioned it on occasion but I don't recall it.

Mc: Do you recall anything that particularly stands out in your mind as significant of Mr. Johnson's techniques or strategy in getting his programs through Congress during his presidential administration?

F: Well, I don't think there's any secret about the fact that President Johnson was very active in efforts to influence members of Congress to support his various programs while he was president. I always thought, myself, that he overdid that. Yet, that came under the head of his business as president. He certainly was far more active in this so-called arm twisting, whatever that means. Anyway, that means real enthusiastic effort, we'll call it. He was far more active in that regard, in trying to impose his views or transfer his views to members of Congress, than any president under whom I have served since I have been here. The observers can debate from now on as to whether that was the proper role for a president to follow or not. Certainly, he thought so, and that came under the head of his business. After all, the members didn't have to do what they were told to do or what they were asked to do. It was up to them. And the Congress must bear the responsibility for the passage of laws, no matter who tries to exercise influence over them in making up their minds

about it.

Mc: How did Mr. Johnson try to influence the groups in Congress?

F: A lot of that is hearsay. As I say, he rarely tried to influence me. I recall a few times when members of his staff would call me and talk to me about pending legislation. They never went out of line in doing so, that I can recall. But I was not too amenable to many of these pleas, because it happened that I had commitments or views that prevented me from going along with them, and I made my position clear to them when I would be contacted. But there were quite a number of people at the White House and in the government, various places in the government, who, during contests over legislation, walked the halls of Congress and the office buildings personally contacting members and trying to talk them into voting the way that, apparently, the President thought was best. That, of course, is not a matter of gossip, but a matter of history, and everyone knows about those efforts and knew about it at the time. It was freely discussed and publicized. That was his modus operandi--operating the government as the president. He took great pride in his legislative accomplishments during the time that he was president.

Mc: Sir, I'd like to ask you some questions now about your service on the Armed Services Committee. Of course, this is a committee that has been concerned, in part, with the war in Vietnam and is going to have quite an impact on Mr. Johnson's administration. Did you ever have occasion to talk with him personally about

Vietnam?

F: No. I've heard him discuss it several times at briefings at the White House.

Mc: How were these briefings conducted? Were they consultative, or were they more briefings after the decision was made?

F: Well, both. Several times the President called members of certain committees, like the Appropriations and Armed Services, in both the House and Senate to the White House. There he would be flanked by the Secretary of Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and others who might be able to contribute to the discussion. And with graphs, blackboards, so forth, the President would present his views and the nature of the issue or issues that existed at the time, whatever they may have been. Then he would call on each of the others to present theirs and answer questions. He did more of that, I think, than any president in modern history--perhaps ever. And I think it was quite constructive that he did so. It made for a better understanding. It probably prevented a certain amount of criticism that might have erupted because of lack of understanding what the issue was at a given time. That is about the extent of my contact with him so far as the issues relating to the war were concerned.

Mc: Did any of these briefings come just prior to some very major decisions in either escalation, or changing?

F: Oh, I'm sure they did. They usually dealt with some significant

development. Offhand, I can't recall one in particular, but I know they were associated with so-called emergency problems that required quick decisions that were of some significance.

Mc: Do any of these particularly stand out in your mind?

F: No, I can't recall any in particular. Probably relating to the bombing policies. There was considerable criticism developed about the restraint being exercised in the fighting of the war, and why Haiphong's not bombed, for example, and why Hanoi was spared, and why the air fields were spared for a long time, and why the oil depots were not destroyed long before they were. And as these issues developed and became quite controversial, the President did, on more than one occasion--I don't recall how many, two or three, four, I don't know--call ranking members and the leadership to the White House for these occasions. Of course, he had his regular meetings with the leadership, I guess, every week. But I'm talking about those that took a lot of a smaller echelon, such as me, into the picture.

Mc: Was there an occasion of much opposition being expressed in these meetings?

F: A good many questions, critical questions, were asked by various members who disagreed with the policies being followed by the administration in the fighting of the war. I don't recall any in particular. I'm sure several of the members of the Committee on Armed Services were not too happy with the manner in which the war was being fought, the policies being made.

Mc: What particular ones are you talking about?

F: Well, for example, the question of whether Haiphong should have been bombed or the harbor mined. I think it's fair for me to say that most of the members of the Armed Services Committee felt that it should have been. It should have been destroyed early, even before the SAM anti-aircraft installations were put in. Members of our committee, ranking members, met with Mr. McNamara periodically at the Pentagon, at his office, for breakfast in the mornings where we discussed these same things. They were usually brought up at briefings at the White House. Answers were given by the Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, others who were there--at least their version of why the policies were being pursued that were pursued at the time. So Johnson did keep in rather close touch with the committes and with the Congress, I thought, in a most commendable approach in an effort to achieve as much unity as possible, which was badly needed.

Mc: What was Mr. Johnson's reaction to criticism and opposition in these meetings and these briefings?

F: He took it in his stride. He's a very effective person, you know, on occasions of that kind, being able to present the logic of his own viewpoint and his reasons for it.

Mc: Was there much of a split on the commitee between what has come to be termed hawks and doves?

F: The House Armed Services Committee was always predominately what you would call hawks.

Mc: Did Mr. Johnson contact many of the members on occasions outside of these briefings?

F: He may have, but I wouldn't know about that. I'm sure he did. I'm sure he conferred with the chairmen of the committees, and things of that kind.

Mc: What was the committee's feeling about response on the part of the administration to the military advice?

F: You see, I'm arrogating to myself a lot of authority when I speak for the committee. I have no authority to do it, and, generally speaking, no votes were taken on these particular issues. I'm simply talking from memory and giving you the benefit of the judgment as expressed at the meetings with Mr. McNamara and discussions at briefings in the committee when the various experts would come in and fill us in on what was happening and why.

I think I can say, or at least to my satisfaction, that the committee was predominantly very much in favor of an acceleration of the efforts to achieve victory long ago, long before the Russians got into the act to the extent they did with providing the anti-aircraft installations.

Mc: Was there much opposition in the committee, in your opinion, to the changes made in the organization of the Defense Department by Mr. McNamara?

F: There was quite a bit of dissent on occasion. No big eruptions, but he was questioned at great length during committee hearings about some of his reorganization plans. But most of them were

fairly acceptable to the committee, I would say. We had some real difficulties regarding changes in the Reserve program, the National Guard, things of those kind. But usually, Mr. McNamara came around to agreeing to acceptable compromises after the controversy had raged for a while.

Mc: His congressional relations overall sort of deteriorated through the years. Was there, towards the end, a reluctance, resentment towards Mr. McNamara?

F: Well, I think it's generally true that his relationship with Congress deteriorated. Mr. McNamara is one of the most able men I ever knew in my life. But his capacity to get along with and to take Congress into his confidence, through committees or otherwise, left something to be desired.

Mc: What would you say, thinking back through this period, were some of the significant votes taken in the Armed Services Committee?

F: There was never any particular controversy in the Armed Services Committee on anything relating to the war. The committee always gave full support to practically all requests from the Department of Defense regarding authorization for airplanes, ships, guns, and what have you, in fighting the war. We had no significant votes, other than to say that we approved everything that was asked for that would help better prepare the men to fight that war.

Mc: Do you feel yourself, now, that a military solution would still be possible in Vietnam?

F: Well, of course it would be possible. It would be much more

expensive now than it would have been a few years ago, before they became so highly prepared. I think as it's turned out, looking back rather than forward, that the stopping of the bombing by Johnson last October was a very serious mistake. I believe most observers would agree with that, who are familiar with what has happened in the North since then. They have moved millions of tons of war equipment freely. They've become a sanctuary. And obviously they are in a much better position to wage war against us and kill our men now than they were last October, when they were being hounded and pounded and many of their arteries severed as they moved this equipment into the battle area.

Mc: What do you think finally influenced Mr. Johnson to more or less change the nature of the war from military solution to a political solution?

F: I would hesitate to try to probe his mind on that. He obviously thought that that would lead to a confrontation with the communists, which he evidently hoped and prayed would result in a solution and the end of the war. It hasn't turned out that way.

Mc: Mr. Fisher, to just kind of conclude our interview, I'd like to ask you some more or less general questions. In your opinion, as a congressman, Mr. Johnson went from a great mandate in 1964, as we've already noted, to pretty widespread unpopularity towards the end of his administration, to what would you attribute this?

F: Well, of course, that's not unusual. The same could have been said of Roosevelt, perhaps a little different degree. The same could

have been said of Mr. Truman. When he went out, his rating was down around 30 or 35 per cent according to the Gallup Poll, if you'll look back at the record. So it's not unusual. Jack Kennedy's popularity made a nose-dive after he was elected, before his assassination. So it's not unusual for a resident with the burdens of the office, all the controversies associated with the leadership of a country during wartime, and what have you, to suffer a certain amount of deterioration in popular support. Probably Eisenhower survived that weakness more than any president in our time. So I would say that it was pretty much what you would have expected under the circumstances.

There was some reaction, I'm sure, on the part of the public, the so-called backlash, because many of them felt the President had gone too far in the civil rights field, which, in a manner of speaking and in the judgment of some experts, helped to contribute to the excitement and the demonstrations and the riots that plagued the country here for the last two or three years by the Negro militants who got out of hand. Much of it having been generated by political debates and the big build-ups for civil rights legislation, which kind of set the whole thing in motion with the resulting demonstrations, sit-ins, sit-downs which always preceded the riots.

I think Mr. Johnson probably suffered some backlash from that, because I think the Congress, which has the responsibility, not Johnson, should be blamed. Johnson didn't pass those bills. I blame the Congress more than I do the President, you understand. But I think the Congress did the country an irreparable disservice

by passing so many extreme--and that's literally true--extreme civil rights measures which are coming back to plague them now every day of the world. Of course, Johnson did recommend those measures.

A good example of that is the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which is, in my judgment, a monstrosity. And I think any historian, who will study and analyze it with an unbiased mind, would agree that, among scores of other provisions written into it, is a provision which authorizes bureaucrats in the federal agencies to withhold federal funds that have been allocated by the Congress for certain purposes such as education or highway construction or what have you, because a particular man who doesn't have to run for office in an agency decides that some form of discrimination is being practiced and therefore has the authority, under the terms of this 1964 Civil Rights Act, to withhold and to refuse to let those people in that community have the money. We are seeing that done every day now in the field of education.

That provision was unsound. It's come back a thousand times to plague those who voted for it. Because now, exercising and abusing that authority, these people are going into communities where there is absolutely no discrimination in the admission of pupils to any school regardless of color, and saying, "You don't have enough mixture of blacks and whites," or Mexican-Americans, or Negros, or whites, and what have you. "From our viewpoint, that isn't good. If you don't mix them up, we're not going to let you have this $100,000 or $500,000 that Congress has voted for

you." They do that under this extremely unwise provision contained in the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

I mention that only as an example of one of scores of other provisions in that act which, so far as the general public is concerned, would be considered very unsound and certainly unpopular in terms of experience in living with this thing since 1964. And it's only one of a number of civil rights and other bills that has not been popular with the general public. So perhaps all of those things contribute, to some extent, to what you mentioned about the lessening of popular support of the President before he went out of office.

Mc: Do you think that this also had an impact on his relations with Congress? That he was not able to pass certainly many of his pieces of legislation in later years?

F: Well, you will recall, on that score, that in 1964 there was a large number of members swept into office who felt themselves beholden, or felt themselves obligated, to follow the dictates of the White House. They were coattail congressmen, we'll say. That often happens when a new president, or even an old president, goes in with a fresh mandate from the people and sweeps in a large group. President Johnson, in 1964, swept in about fifty or sixty new members who held office for two years--nearly every one of them swept out two years later--who did precisely what they were told to do from the White House during the time they were in. But they went out in two years. They didn't last. They were political

accidents, we'll say. During those two years, most of the so-called Great Society legislation was put on the books. Regardless of what the bills contained, they were approved by this majority that was built up as a result of the 1964 congressional campaigns. Then after two years, about fifty of them were swept out of office.

Naturally, after that, the Congress became more independent, more rational, more moderate and, I think, more sensible. I don't like to be in a position of criticizing the President for being for or against these various proposals I've referred to. I blame the Congress of the United States, even though they were urged by the President.

Mc: Do you think that the power and the prestige of Congress has declined through the Johnson Administration?

F: No, I wouldn't say that. I really don't think you could base that conclusion on any particular thing that's happened. There has been much criticism of the Congress for a long time. I remember when I came to Congress during the New Deal days when Roosevelt was in the White House. Congress was at a very low ebb then in the public opinion, because it had become a sort of rubber-stamp deal. The public was pretty well fed up with it, and there was quite a reaction against the tendency of Congress to yield supinely to the dictates of the White House and have New Deal legislation written down at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. So it's nothing new for Congress to be criticized, you know. And I can't, from my viewpoint, detect any difference much in public support and respect for Congress. It comes and goes; it ebbs and flows, depending on

the issues of the day and the problems that confront us. The Congress is supposed to be criticized. That's one of the good old American privileges, and they've been doing it ever since the Constitutional Convention.

Mc: Mr. Fisher, have you had any contacts with Mr. Johnson concerning his Ranch, which resides in your district?

F: None in particular. I often talked with him casually about the Pedernales, the rainfall, the kind of cattle he kept. I've visited him on the Ranch. I spent the night with him there one night, and he took me all over it; showed me all of his livestock and his plans for improving the breeds. He was intensely interested in the soil and in agriculture and in livestock. And he would talk to you at the drop of the hat about any of those things. From time to time, I had occasion to talk with him about the price of wool, mohair, Hereford cattle, and what have you.

Mc: But it's just been, generally, in relationship to what he's doing on his own property there?

F: That is true. Yes.

Mc: My reason for asking you that is in one respect, his property lying in your district, you would be his congressman.

F: That's true. A lot of his property is in the Twenty-First District. He owns land in Llano County, and of course Gillespie County. I'm sure in both of those he has ranching properties. Both of them are in my district.

Mc: Has there been any reaction by the members of your constituency to

his acquisition of larger amounts of land down there?

F: Oh, I don't think so. I haven't heard it discussed. We are sort of accustomed to seeing people buy land when they've got the money to buy it. That's a good old Texas habit. Texans, I think, in general, love to own land. They're just natural lovers of the soil.

Mc: What do you see as Mr. Johnson's strengths and his weaknesses? And also, has he changed any over the years from when you first knew him?

F: I would assume so in some respects. I suppose every human being changes, particularly after going through the experiences that he has. I think Lyndon Johnson takes a great deal of pride in his contribution to history--whatever it is. And of course, the observers and the critics can present their own views as to how good or how bad this or that might have been. A lot of people will criticize him about the conduct of the war. I always supported him. I always felt that more should be done, but he was there where he had to press the button. And he naturally served during a very, very critical time in our history. He probably, looking back, is very sensitive to the evaluation of his domestic program in terms of how much he contributed to the good of the country.

I do know that he always felt very ambitious with regard to the White House. I remember when I spent a night with him--I don't think I'm violating any confidence; that was when he was majority leader shortly after he had his heart attack--when, looking the LBJ Ranch home over, he made some comment to the

effect, "You know, this would make a wonderful second White House, wouldn't it? Just look at this thing." I said, "It certainly would." He said, "Dick Russell slept right in this bed where you're going to sleep tonight." And then he named over many other of the top senators and leaders of the nation who had visited him there. Then, in connection with that, he said, "You know, this building, after all, would make a good second White House, wouldn't it?" Well, that was a good many years ago. So I do know he had a sense of history. He was very ambitious, and I'm sure he takes great pride in the administration that he headed during very critical years in our history.

Mc: How do you think history will rate him?

F: It would be sort of unkind and probably premature for me to try to assess or speak for history in that regard. Frankly, I don't think he'd be regarded as one of the greatest of the presidents by any means. I think he would be regarded as one of the more active and effective presidents, probably, in history, that is, in terms of being able to promote a project and get it approved in the Congress. I am one of those who, as I said a moment ago, has not agreed with many of those policies. And therefore, I probably am not the proper one to assess them in terms of history. I think he will be somewhat outstanding in the history books because of his being a tall Texan and his capacity to get things done. Johnson worked at it a little harder than anyone else in modern times--with one exception, Franklin Roosevelt. Johnson

was quite effective.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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