INTERVIEWEE: E. ERNEST GOLDSTEIN (Tape #4)

INTERVIEWER: T. H. BAKER

December 17, 1968

B: The tape may have been running out toward that last part there. You were saying that you advised the President not to go to Chicago for the convention.

G: That's right.

B: Was he considering going?

G: One day I had gotten out of here to go to lunch over at the Georgetown Club--I've forgotten who was buying my lunch that day; and I got a phone call--no, it was before going out to lunch that the President called me in the morning and said, "Do you think I ought to go to Chicago?" And I said, "My feeling at this moment is, no! The way things are building up out there I can see no reason for it." So he suggested that I look at the precedents and see whether any President who was not standing for re-election had gone out to the convention, what the whole history of Presidents and political conventions had been; and then to give him a memo on it with my arguments pro and con--wherever I came out. And I guess some reason why the luncheon sticks in my head is that that was about 12:30 I had that phone call from the President; went to lunch at 1:00. And I told him it would take a couple of hours. But somehow or other somebody got their wires crossed, and at 1:30 I had a phone call at the Georgetown Club asking me to dictate the memo over the phone. And that became rather impossible, but I got the memo done that evening; and it showed that until Roosevelt's time no President had ever gone to the convention. And then Hoover had done his acceptance speech long after the convention over at Constitution Hall, etc. Truman had gone; Eisenhower had gone; Roosevelt had not gone every

year that he was President--he missed two; and so there was really no precedent. Anyhow, for that and other reasons, I suggested that the President would not add to his own luster by going to Chicago even though his birthday was involved and one thing and another; and if he had to address the convention to do it by television. There was then the possibility that if the convention went to McCarthy, it might not be desirable for the President even to make a television address. And so by that time it was no longer a question of Kennedy, unhappily he was dead, so it was McCarthy or Humphrey, and I certainly couldn't see the President going. So there were a series of memos beginning with that first one that carried on my views as to what should or should not be done about going to Chicago.

B: If there were a series of memos, did you get the impression that perhaps the President really wanted to go?

G: No. The reason for a series was because you were getting changes in conditions; and as you had external changes, your argument either became stronger or weaker. And so this was just a sort of way of updating the memo to meet whatever new contingencies had arisen. I had a feeling from the beginning probably that he really didn't want to go.

B: One would think that it was fraught with all kind of difficulties far outweighing the possible benefits.

G: There was the so-called last hurrah theory, you know, get the tribute from the party, but I really don't think that that--although the President owes a great deal to the Democratic party and the Democratic party owes him a great deal, there are various ways of expressing it beside a lot of shouting and hollering in the convention hall. And I don't think it was in keeping with the dignity of the office, particularly since he was not going to run again.

B: The time has now come for the evaluation type things. Granted the future scholar will assume that you were not exactly the most objective witness on the subject--

G: Absolutely not.

B: You obviously admire Lyndon Johnson. Why? What are the strengths that attract you to him?

G: The things that attract me--first of all, courage. I like anybody with a lot of guts, and I think he has demonstrated that he has the courage to do what he thinks is right, whether it's popular or unpopular--that's strength in anybody.

Secondly, I think he's probably--I have no idea what his I.Q. is, but I have a very strong feeling that he's a genius. I've never seen anybody with a better grasp of information once it has been fed in, nor with an ability to dredge back in the memory bank and pull up relevant stuff that hits or fits the problems--a very incisive way of dealing with things. As a lawyer, I can just thank God for the legal profession in this country that he didn't become a lawyer, because he would have taken it all over; he has got a very incisive mind.

B: Do you find his knowledge extends beyond politics and public affairs?

G: Yes. It's a very extensive knowledge. I never thought of it as being limited to just public affairs and politics. You know, public affairs and politics covers an awful lot. I don't know what his musical tastes are.

B: That's what I was thinking of--music, literature.

G: I don't particularly like his ideas of painting and sculpture--they're not my ideas of painting and sculpture, but he has very strong likes in that area. I have no way of gauging what he likes in the way of music. But I never have a feeling that he's narrow in his world--his world is a very expansive one.

No one can be a generalist or a specialist in everything, either one. But I just never had the feeling that he's terribly limited.

B: What are some of his other strengths?

G: I think I would add dogged determination to courage and just sheer brilliance of mind. I think he's also probably a very good judge of people--I say "probably" because I think nobody is ever 100-percent perfect in this area. Although one way you can measure it, this Administration has been totally free of any scandal period. Now, this has got to be something more than luck. And if he hasn't made all the choices, at least those to whom he has delegated the choice-making responsibility have avoided getting people whose skirts did not stay clean. In that sense, he has done a remarkable job; I don't think any Administration in my lifetime up till now has been able to manage that little trick. So those are the things that have been attracting me. I think probably the real key to my initial admiration for him was his whole civil rights approach, which has been something that has been paramount as far as my own interests. And his speech the other night to the Negro government appointees epitomizes all the things that I think are so good about him.

B: What about weaknesses or faults?

G: The President has them. I think that sometimes he makes a decision on too little data--he may be forced to by circumstance; and it's awfully hard to budge him once he has really locked into something, even though it's not too late to unlock, but he hates to move out of a situation.

B: Am I reading in there an inference which doesn't exist of--you have just talked about his breadth of knowledge, and now you're talking about a decision based on too little information.

G: You can have a great breadth of knowledge, but when you get to make a decision in some particular area--

B: In a specific case.

G: In a specific case, you may by force of circumstance have to make a decision without having all the data in; without having maybe 75 or 80 percent of the potential data in, because there just isn't time or opportunity. On the other hand, he sometimes can make a decision on insufficient data and still have time to change around. And when that happens, you wonder, when the data seems so overwhelming for a change which really would improve things, then it's a question of your judgment against his, obviously. And whenever this sort of thing has arisen, I've felt that there has been a lack of flexibility on his part, so I'm not particularly attracted to it.

B: That determination can sometimes be stubbornness?

G: Yes. I said the President is a good judge of people; now I'll give you the other side of the coin. I think the President has what appears to me to be a double standard in his relationships with people. Sometimes you feel that those who are least loyal sometimes are treated as though they were the most loyal; and you sometimes wonder--I'm thinking now of people who are no longer in the White House, I don't want to get into people I really don't know--well, I know, but the stories at least that you hear, and it's hard to draw too much of a generalization; but you get a feeling that people who have betrayed the President's confidence until the last moment when they left seemed to have been treated like the long lost prodigal son. And I don't know why people do that, but I have a feeling he does.

I think he also has a tendency at times to draw in and to deal with too small a group for advice, and then all of a sudden expand out and take a lot in; he's almost like the shutter of a camera--the iris of a camera; and I don't quite understand why he does it--there doesn't seem to be any rational bouncing around in this sense.

B: That other episode, the case you mentioned of treating people better than they deserved--could you or would you give a specific example?

G: Well, no, I won't. Because this is a very subjective judgment, and I may be dead wrong on it. I'll go this far. I don't think the President was responsible for the credibility gap.

B: You don't feel that Mr. Johnson himself was responsible for his generally bad relationships with the press?

G: I would distinguish between bad relationships with the press and the credibility gap. One is a matter of fact, one is a matter of subjective judgment. And the sixteen or eighteen major allegations that make up the credibility gap, when you analyze them, they really aren't there. I've gone through that exercise at one time in my life. No, I think they're two different things. I think bad press relations is one thing; I think the credibility gap is another.

B: What's it like to work for Mr. Johnson? Does he really, as it has been said, consume his staff members?

G: Sometimes he does, and sometimes he doesn't. I don't think anybody really gets consumed; I think you can let yourself become consumed. He does like to be all-embracing, and if you're willing to be swallowed up, I guess you can be. But I think you can be effective without being swallowed up. The way in which I felt it to the extent that it was a matter of concern to me was when I, before March 31st, was trying to think of the ways in which I could gracefully leave here after two years.

B: You were just afraid to broach the--

G: It's not a question of fear, but the President is a very persuasive man; and trying to, in a nice dignified way, without having him feel that you were leaving him in a lurch or betraying him or--here he is, he would be going on as President for another several years and would be carrying all the burdens, and why is it so important for me to get up and go back to my life; I mean this sort of thing, where you have got arguments as well as just feelings involved. And the President indicated he wanted me to come back to Texas with him. My allergies won't allow it. But if my allergy problem were soluble, I would think that I would have a hell of a time arguing with him about why I should give up Paris and come back to Austin, Texas. He likes to have people around him that he feels comfortable with, which is a fairly normal reaction. But I feel the same way about being eaten up as I do about people who complain about all the problems of being a teacher--I don't think you become a teacher because you want to earn a lot of money; if you did, you're a damned fool and you've gone in the wrong profession. So you don't get yourself into this sort of thing unless you're willing to take all the things that go with it. And it isn't that unpalatable. I think this is a part of the self-aggrandizement or the self-buildup that you can get yourself into where the car and the White House operators are more important than the job you do, and that becomes a real pain in the neck.

B: Does the President have in his day-to-day relationship with the people around here moods? Is he up one day and down the next?

G: Sure. Like anybody else.

B: Do you people have some sort of code to detect--

G: No.

B: I remember the old story about how Eisenhower had a blue or a brown suit.

G: I'm sure some people must have a code--I don't. I just listen and sense what I hear. You can't always be sure from the words. Sometimes you can be sure more from the intonation than from the exact words. And I think intonation is the only thing--the way in which it's said. He can be kidding the pants off of you and sounding rough as all get out, and you just come back with the right amount of--I won't say insult, but the right amount of return, you'll find that he's laughing like all get-out and he was just waiting for a good return. So you just have to play each one by ear the same way you do in every other personal relationship. I can't tell from what dress my wife puts on in the morning what her mood is either.

B: Have you ever been the victim of the Presidential temper?

G: I don't know whether I'd call it--I'm sure it's temper. To the extent I've been a victim, I suppose I've been sometimes at fault; he has fairly high standards and sometimes you don't quite live up to them. I haven't lost any sleep about it.

B: How influential do you suppose Mrs. Johnson has been in his career, particularly in the Presidency?

G: I would guess and hope very influential. She's my particular folk hero at this moment. She's a lady in every respect, and she's a very broad-gauged human being. I've no doubt about her expertise in the area of the arts and in general, and in anything to do with people. I think she's a very level, solid person. I've had the good fortune to work on two or three things that she was interested in; in fact, in the whole background of the setting up of the Oral History Project I spent a great deal of time with her directly instead of with the President, which led to this current operation that you're running. And I found her to be one of the most receptive people to any sort of suggestion

that would lead toward excellence or a good way of doing things or a professional way of doing things--this is her standard, and her standards are very high. I would assume from comments that the President has made--nothing that she has ever said--that she does have a good deal of influence. I can tell when he's read a memo in bed and apparently found that it was lucid enough so that he didn't have to turn it over to Mrs. Johnson to translate, and vice versa; so I would imagine she does have an influence and it would be a good one.

B: Why do you suppose--and I'm almost at the end--why do you suppose that Lyndon Johnson has run into so much difficulty in the country generally? Even granted your previous statement that he probably could have been reelected, but after a battle, as you said, his popularity declined precipitously there; and why do you suppose it happened?

G: I came just when he hit bottom, and I had been out of the country, so a lot of this is reconstruction. I think first of all he overestimated the intelligence of the American people; this is, I think, the ultimate paradox, that he tried to wage a war which was essentially a police action on the basis of an abstract--it was almost an abstract principle--without involving the American people through their emotions and their passions; which in a sense said, "I think that you're intelligent enough to be able to involve yourself in this sort of thing without getting you to hate the enemy, without going into gasoline rationing, and all the things so that you have a sense of participating." And you get the basic puritan ethic of the American people where you've got to suffer a little when you're enjoying things, and the idea that people could be dying off in Viet Nam and you're sitting at home and watching it all on color TV, subconsciously bugs a lot of people. And it might be an acceptable type of bugging if people were also willing to be rational about it and understand that you're not going to

end the war by stopping the production of color TV sets; nor does the production of color TV sets mean the guy is going to die over there--there's no relationship. We don't refuse to make that jump.

Secondly, related to this because I accept the proposition that--well, what the President was really trying to do in the Viet Nam war, he may never have articulated it completely, but it boils down to the fact that the most illogical, most insane activity that a man can conduct is war; and the only thing worse than waging a war is starting a war. And if someone starts a war, then this is the ultimate crime, and that has to be stopped. So everything we've done in Viet Nam has been consistent with all the articles of the U.N. Charter about not trying to take the other guy's territory or changing his form of government; we've done none of that above the DMZ--we've played this almost antiseptic, surgical operation. And in addition to the inability of people to accept a war in which they did not become emotionally involved in hating Ho Chi Minh, I don't think there's anybody in the United States that hates Ho Chi Minh, this is to the President's everlasting credit because it would be very simple to make him the figure that Castro was awhile back.

But the second thing is the boob tube. I think we really have failed to understand the nature of television in this country. When you read or when you listen, it requires a very definite amount of intellectual effort to comprehend. You can actually watch television without thinking; you can be almost hypnotized watching this movement across the screen, and you don't have to think. And part of the problem stems from the fact that we've all grown up to believe that that which we see with our eyes is ultimately true. And if you get a selection of truth and you see it with your eyes on television, you accept that as the whole truth; and you have absolutely no conditioning which

makes you pull back and say, "Well, yes, but is there anything off camera I'm not seeing, or was there anything that proceeded this, or anything that followed it that I haven't seen?" But you accept that as a finite whole. The result is we've maneuvered ourselves into a very difficult spot with television--I'm sure we would never have gone through the Pacific war if we had had live coverage of 5,000 guys dying--terribly on the beaches. We never would have gotten that far. So we're dealing completely out of context; actually, if we showed automobile accidents and the casualty rates are about the same each night on TV as we've shown the Viet Nam war, you might get everybody to move cars off the road--I don't know; but we're dealing with things that are practically equivalent. So television has had a role.

Television has had another role in that the President, when he gets before the TV camera, somehow or other--when he has got that podium and everything, he freezes. And the man that comes across when sitting in a room like this doesn't come across unless you sort of unleash him as they did once with a press conference where he just started pacing back and forth on a free mike. But as President, he can't ad lib all the time because it's too damned dangerous. Mr. David Kennedy showed us yesterday with his comments about gold how impossible it is to ad lib in this business. So the President is a prisoner of that.

He's also a prisoner of what I consider parochialism, provincialism--I accept the thesis that because he's from the Southwest a lot of what he does is less acceptable than if he grew up in the Northeast where I did. People are willing to accept--again, it's a cosmetic approach to things, it's the visual things. His ears are big, his accent is broad; therefore, he must be a typical Texas cowbody. And the same liberal community that objected to Foster Dulles' massive retaliation objects when Johnson does exactly what they call for, and

that is a flexible response. Viet Nam is a flexible response. So you get this type of paradox. I think he's a victim--I'm sure he contributed to it himself in some ways--he's a man who likes to hold his cards close to his chest; I happen to believe in holding your cards close to your chest. The press doesn't like it and it frustrates them; and so the press has not been as kind as it might. I don't know--it's a whole can of worms when you start trying to figure out all the things that went wrong.

B: Finally, and I promise this is the last one, it's almost all over, do you leave with any lingering sense of things undone?

G: Well, there are things I would have liked to have done that I didn't do. But there aren't as many as the things I was happy I was able to do. But I've never gone home from any job really at night and had everything cleared off the desk. I've always said, and I've never quite understood why I've said it, but I've always said that if the day came that I went home at night and my desk was absolutely clear, I might as well die the next day. I don't know where I picked that up, and I'm not sure I want to continue that statement any longer, because as of January 20 my desk will be empty. Oh, I've got regrets, but they're very few compared to what I think is the great excitement out of this--this is something that happens to--God knows what the statistics are, how many people in how many lifetimes; but my real regret is that I came in late. I think this in a sense has been a handicap to doing all the things I wanted to do, because my scope, although it sounds like a very full plate with a whole list of things, when you really get down to examining how many calories there are in it, they're pretty few. You know, a lot of pre-existing relationships that you really don't want to tamper with. So that the amount that can be done is relatively limited; I think if I had any one regret it's just that

I didn't get here about five years earlier, in which case I probably wouldn't be here today.

B: Anything else you'd like to put on this record?

G: Yes. I suppose the one thing that gets lost in the shuffle is the amount of work or sacrifice your family puts into it while you're in it. I've gotten good backstopping--I have no real complaint in that direction, but I think it's probably to the extent the job is tough because of the physical aspects of the hours and the bad food you eat and bad drinks you get and all the things that go into running around in this town and everything that goes with it. I think the wear and tear is probably tougher on the family than it is on the person working in the job; because you have all of the psychic satisfaction that the job produces, and there's very little of it you can share on the outside because it just isn't good politics to talk about everything that you know. And I suppose I've become more tight-lipped and I argue less at cocktail parties than I ever have in my life, which may be an advantage from my wife's point of view, but also it means that she shares less in whatever I happen to be thinking about.

B: That's one of the things that Mr. Johnson is aware of, isn't it--doesn't he attempt to encourage or thank families?

G: I would say, and this is probably the best note to end on, I have not felt like an employee in this job. I don't feel that my relationship with the President ends on a nine to five basis, or that my relationship with Mrs. Johnson is truly one of a flunky working for her husband--I feel that we've been made to be welcome as family friends, and I don't think any other Administration has done it. This happened to us the first two days, as I told at the beginning of this story; and Sunday night before that fateful

January 20, there'll be a family reunion, I gather, and so we'll end as we began. I told the President that if he wants to travel, I'll do his advancing in Europe. And that is the great thing to do. But I really don't feel like an employee, so it's not all bad.

B: A good note to end on.

G: Yes.

November 23, 2010

MEMO FOR THE RECORD

Through examination of the background file for the interviews of E. Ernest Goldstein, it has been determined that Interviews III & IV were both recorded on December 19, 1968.

Laura M. Eggert
Archives Technician

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
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Gift of Personal Statement

By E. Ernest Goldstein

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

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Signed E. Ernest Goldstein

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