

INTERVIEW II

DATE: October 10, 1984
INTERVIEWEE: ASHTON GONELLA
INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette
PLACE: Mrs. Gonella's office, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

MG: Well, let's start with that first meeting.

AG: All right, I met Mr. Johnson I guess about the ninth of December, [1957?] and I had only been in the office a week or two working for him. In I guess two days' time, he came in to me and he'd said the most important thing that had to be done was to get Christmas presents done for the county men. He said, "I need you to go out and buy something, get the boxes, get the paper, go from beginning to end." And this was very important, with all of the other things that were going on then. So we decided on a fountain pen with his signature on it. So we ordered those and I went out and got the boxes and the wrapping paper. They put me in the back in the jail, the room that was the jail in the old office building, and I stayed back there by myself and wrapped two hundred and sixty-five fountain pens and fixed them for mailing and so forth. And he would come back about every two hours and say, "How many have you gotten done? How are you doing?" and so forth. That impressed me that, as I say, with the other things that were going on, that he was thinking of what he should get for Christmas for the county men.

MG: Did he explain who the county men were?

AG: No. Well, not then, but I learned. And then I had to learn all the counties and what was the county seat in every county, which was great fun. (Laughter)

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(Interruption)

Then on New Year's Eve, the Johnsons arrived in Washington and we all met over at Scooter and Dale Miller's house--wait a minute, I beg your pardon; it was the Thornberrys' house, it was Homer and Eloise's house--for a New Year's Eve party. Scooter and Dale were there. [So were] Walter [Jenkins], Mildred and Glynn [Stegall], Willie Day [Taylor], the girls, Mary Margaret [Wiley Valenti]. Did I say Walter and Marge? And I think the [William S.] Whites were there. But we had a New Year's Eve party and all celebrated the New Year coming in.

(Interruption)

MG: Let's talk about this in general, this is a good time. I wanted you to just talk about LBJ's relationship with his staff and what kind of staff he had. You mentioned that before your arrival virtually everyone but George Reedy was a Texan.

AG: Right.

MG: And this was traditional, to hire people from your home state, is that right?

AG: Yes. That was pretty well true throughout the Senate. You know, every Senate staffer came from the home state, but I felt Louisiana was close enough to the border. People would come in the office and immediately say, "What part of Texas are you from?" And I would always say, "Well, I was born thirty miles east of Mrs. Johnson's home town," which of course is Louisiana, but they didn't know that. So I got by with it on that.

But the staff in itself was close to one another. I mean we genuinely liked each other, and I never saw that one person was trying

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to knife somebody else in the back. Each person had their own niche. No one would have had Walter's job for love nor money, but Walter wasn't trying to backbite George Reedy with the press or--I mean everyone worked together.

And I think Mr. Johnson liked to have the staff around him week-ends, Saturday nights, Sunday afternoons; we would go over and have supper, spaghetti or something and all sit around and, yes, it was work.

MG: Was this something that would--would they invite you each weekend or would you be expected to just show up or how would--?

AG: You would get a call. It might be at five o'clock, say, "Why aren't you here?" or something. You wouldn't just go uninvited, no, that would not have been done. But I mean he would call as late as five-thirty or six and say, "You're late. Where are you?" or something like that. But I stayed with the Johnsons when I first moved up here, so I was at home with them until I found an apartment, which was about two weeks. But in that time it was just every single night there were at least two or three people from the staff there.

MG: Well, let's talk about these sessions. I gather they were partly work and partly pleasure, that they would cook hamburgers or spaghetti or whatever, but you would also have some discussion of legislation or politics, or what did he--?

AG: Oh, that was the predominant thing. I can't imagine him being in a room with a conversation talking about the weather. I mean that was a waste of time. I'm sure you've heard this a thousand times, but his vocation, avocation, everything, was the Senate. You were just wasting time if you were talking about anything else. Now, obviously you might spend a

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few minutes talking about the children, and he was interested in your children, what they were doing, how they were doing in school, did they have the chicken pox. And he knew who did and who didn't. But everything centered around the Senate.

MG: Did he frequently have people other than the staff over at these gatherings, senators, members of Congress?

AG: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. The Speaker was there many times. Some selected so-called you might say Texas press, like I think Bill White was sort of accepted as someone you could be comfortable and relax around. And obviously the Jim Rows and Tommy Corcorans; they weren't staff but he considered I think [in] a way they worked for him, and they did, though not paid. Not many of the senators ever came to the informal dinners and the weekend sessions. The senators--well, that's almost another story--would drop by his office at night and have a drink before going home and wrap up what they had done during the day and what they were going to do tomorrow. But the home sessions were mostly staff, a few selected press, like the Thornberrys were not staff but they were very much inside. The Millers, not as much as the Thornberrys. Of course, he [Thornberry] was a member of Congress then. The Texas delegation from time to time, some of the members of the House.

MG: Yes. You mentioned other senators coming by. Did LBJ during this period frequently go to Rayburn's little office, the Board of Education?

AG: Oh, yes.

MG: Tell me how routine that was; tell me how often he went and when would he go, and would he leave from there or would he come back to his own office?

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AG: Oh, he'd come back to the office. He would go over there I would say at least once a week and usually it was for a period of, say, thirty minutes, you know, no long session, but he had to get the feel of what was going on in the House and the Texas delegation.

The Texas delegation had a luncheon every Tuesday in which they all got together and talked of legislation. The two houses worked together, plus the delegation worked together. He stayed very, very close to that.

MG: Did you ever go into the Board of Education [room]?

AG: No, I have never been in the Board of Education room. I think women were off limits.

MG: Is that right?

Let's go back to the staff for a minute and let me ask you to, as best you can, outline the general responsibilities of each person on the staff, beginning with Walter Jenkins.

AG: Well, Walter Jenkins ran the office; he was chief of staff, if you want to put it that way. When anyone got a word from Walter that something could or could not be done, they knew they had gotten it from LBJ through Walter. He had the most marvelous credibility with everyone in Washington, and Texas, as being the voice of LBJ. Arthur Perry was the AA. Now usually the AA is the head of the office, but this was a unique situation that Mr. Perry was the AA but Walter ran the office.

MG: Was it just because of Perry's seniority in having been in Washington all those years that he had the title?

AG: I never did understand fully why they did it this way, but Mr. Perry had the title, but everyone knew--well, one thing I think Mr. Johnson said

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at one time [was] if there were constituents that would come to Washington, and if they could go back and say, "Well, I met with the AA and he showed me around the office," this made the people feel good. When you've got--at that time I think we had ten and a half million constituents--if Walter had spent all of his time greeting them and visiting with them and showing them the Capitol and so forth, then he couldn't have gotten [done] the things he needed to get done.

MG: So Mr. Perry's role was primarily ceremonial, or did he have--?

AG: You might say that. He did a lot of the casework. He and Glynn Stegall did the casework.

MG: Now, I gather Walter also did a lot of the personal finances and his--

AG: Oh, yes. Income tax. As I say, he was chief of staff, appointments, everything.

MG: Okay, who else?

AG: Mildred was Walter's secretary and his right hand. Juanita [Roberts] was in the Senate office. The Senate office was very, very small.

MG: Now, when you say the Senate office, do you mean the Texas [office]?

AG: It's the one in the Senate Office Building. In other words, he had a Senate office and then he had a majority leader office.

MG: The Senate office was really the Texas office, wasn't it?

AG: That's correct. That's where Walter and Mr. Perry and Juanita and Mildred and so forth were. Then over in the Capitol, George was in-- I guess actually at the time he was Democratic Policy [Committee]. He handled--the staffs today would be shocked--all of the press, all of the labor, all of the speech writing and so forth, coordinated that, did most of the speech writing except for like when Jim Rowe would be called

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in, or Tommy Corcoran, for a special thing. But I don't know how he handled as much as he did on that. Any labor problem, we always had to go to George. And he set up all of the press interviews, talked with the press, fended the press, you know, for Mr. Johnson, and Willie Day was his right hand. They were in the Capitol. And then, let's see, at that time I guess Gerry Siegel was in Democratic Policy. Harry McPherson had just started or maybe he didn't come until the next year.

MG: No, I think he was there in 1958.

AG: I guess Harry was, yes. And he was young, bright, had just started. Then in Mr. Johnson's office, there was Mary Margaret and myself. And the only reason I was there was Mary Rather's brother and his wife had been killed just a few months prior and left several little children and Mary had to stay in Texas. Mary had been Mr. Johnson's secretary, and Mary Margaret answered the phones. So then we reversed, and I remember it was at the New Year's Eve party Mr. Johnson put both of us on the sofa next to each other and he said, "Now, you two are going to get along. I don't want to hear any squabbling out of either one of you or both of you go." (Laughter) Because I had never met her and she had never met me. And he said, "You all are going to work together and I'm going to take a gamble." And he just told me, he said he would like to take a gamble to see if I could handle it. So I answered the phone and Mary Margaret was his secretary, and we were in G-14 in the Capitol, the little back room off the gallery floor.

I'm trying to think who else was there. Grace Tully, I don't know whether she was there at that time. Pauline Moore was over in Democratic Policy.

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MG: Yes.

AG: And I think that's--and then on the committee, I think Glen Wilson was on the Space Committee.

MG: Yes.

AG: I know we had a staff picture taken--I've got one--I think it was in about 1958 or 1959. I've got it at home with all the identifications on the back. And it really was a very small staff in comparison with what they have today.

MG: Is that right?

AG: Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but I know of the Texas senators now--I worked, as you know, for a while for [Lloyd] Bentsen, when he first came here, to help set up his office, and I looked at his staff the other day and I think they've got something like seventy people, whereas Texas now is only what, about thirteen or fourteen million? When we were there, it was ten and a half million, and we got by with about twenty, including the Majority Leader's office, which shows the difference in how staffs have grown.

MG: Well, the opulent Majority Leader's Office that they called the Taj Mahal, was that P-38, or what was that?

AG: No, that came later. We went in G-14 in 1958.

MG: Okay.

AG: It was a very small [office]; it was two rooms. It's the Sergeant at Arms' Office now. But as you walked in, there was the little small room and I was the first desk and Mary Margaret here, and then the Senator had the big office in the back with a conference table where people would come in. It was right off of the gallery floor.

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Then we moved I guess in 1959 down to P-38, which had been the Secretary of the Senate's Office.

MG: I see.

AG: Or was it the Sergeant at Arms'? Oh, my memory's gone all of a sudden. No, it was Joe Duke's office, that's right, it was the Sergeant at Arms' Office. So he designated that to be the Majority Leader's Office because it was right off the floor.

MG: So your initial role there was really to answer the phone and I assume to place calls for him?

AG: Sure, to keep up with the schedule. Then we took turns [staying late] back even in the beginning of the session. The Senate stayed in later than maybe they do now, and so Mary Margaret and I would switch. Say, Monday was her late night, Tuesday was my late night, and so forth. So we kind of took turns on that so that we had some time off.

MG: This was a practice that he followed, I gather, in some variation in the White House, where he would have more secretaries but one of them would have to stay late every night.

AG: Sure. Well, just typical of him, even if the Senate went out, say, at five o'clock, he would always on the floor turn to two or three senators and say, "Come on up." And they'd come up and have a drink and sit and talk about legislation, what we did, who didn't support us who should [have], what are we going to do tomorrow. As I say, it was not any nine-to-five job, it was a--

MG: Well, let me ask you to describe one of his days. What typically would he do?

AG: Well, I was not there in the olden days when I heard that he came in at seven-thirty. But he would usually come in around eight-thirty, quarter

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of nine, and had to have that hot coffee right away. He would get on the phone immediately and start calling either Bobby [Baker] or someone to see what was going to take place that day. [There were] constantly people wanting to get his ear, whether it be press or senators or--I guess in 1958 at that time he was always--there were people, like I remember Joe Alsop would come in wanting to interview him, get in-depth stories. At that point he was just really coming into I guess you might say a national prominence, so you were getting national writers, *Time* magazine and so forth, that wanted in-depth stories, *Newsweek* and so forth.

But he stayed on the floor. I guess I compare it to how the Senate is today, but it was like a child of his, I guess, that you couldn't leave unattended for fear that child might get its fingers burned or something. He stayed on the floor and constantly was going over talking to one senator, trying to get legislation through or smoothed out. Then he'd come back and get on the phone and call the Speaker and see what the House was doing. And constantly on the phone with George, and then Walter to see what was happening in the state office.

MG: How did you know what calls to put through to him?

AG: I guess you just learn by instinct or--you didn't make too many mistakes, though, with Mr. Johnson.

MG: Is that right?

AG: You might make one but you never made it again. I mean, you could always buzz him and say, "Do you want to talk to so-and-so?" But the number where we were, I mean the office number, was not just out, given

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to constituents. It couldn't have been, because he wouldn't have had time to do anything but sit on the phone talking to the constituents.

MG: Yes.

AG: But at that time also he was in very close contact with Eisenhower. I mean, the President would call or he would call him if they had legislation he thought there was something that maybe the President wouldn't sign. There was a very close, not constant, but a very close association there.

MG: Okay, well, that's a--.

(Interruption)

AG: Two or three thoughts on the majority leadership. I guess he did at one time that I know of, you know, in talks with the staff, talk about resigning. But number one, he didn't take too kindly to criticism and people were beginning to snipe at him, Mrs. Roosevelt, this one and that one and then some of the press. And then some of the senators maybe not liking some of his legislation proposals and so forth, the Governor of Maryland about the space and so forth. And I think when they all started sniping at him, he thought, "Well, maybe I will resign." But I also think that history shows that the majority leaders usually got defeated. If you look back at the various ones, [Ernest] McFarland--

MG: Scott Lucas, before him.

AG: Scott Lucas. Because once you become a majority leader, you then start thinking strictly nationally and you lose your people back home. That's one thing I think he always tried to keep, was to keep Texas and the Texas interests and friends and people and do that balance, and then when he started getting sniping from national interests, then maybe he thought, "Well, I'll just go back to being the senator from Texas."

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MG: Well, what was his mood this spring? Did he seem a little bit disenchanted with politics or with the Senate?

AG: No, I don't think he ever seemed disenchanted with the Senate or with politics, never. It may have been just, as I say, the criticisms he was getting. You can take one or two, but he didn't want people to criticize him, because in his own heart [inaudible] he was trying to do what was best. And if you criticized him, then that meant you were telling him he's wrong on what he's trying to do.

MG: Was he in good health this year?

AG: I don't have any comparisons so I wouldn't say. If he'd been any healthier, we would have all been dead. (Laughter) As I say, they tell me he slowed down, coming in maybe an hour later in the morning, but he was still there at nine and ten at night working and then he would go home and still have night reading. He's always had night reading to take home. I don't see how he could have been any healthier.

MG: Now, the [John] Kennedy-[Irving] Ives labor bill came up that year. Let me get you to just talk about LBJ's relationship with labor here and describe [it]. Did he get along well with the national leaders or the Texas leaders? Do you feel like he was moving closer to labor during this period?

AG: Oh, yes, I do. I'm not sure I'm the best source for that. I think George Reedy is your labor--he can give more details on that with more accuracy. But I would see more and more contact with Andy Biemiller and calls to George Meany and Walter Reuther and the Texas labor people. Yes, I do think he went more to that. I think then the forty-hour week came up at that time, didn't it?

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MG: Well, of course, the big issue here was labor reform. There'd been investigations and hearings, and there was a tremendous interest in having some sort of labor reform bill, and I guess the conservatives favored a more punitive measure and the liberals favored something that would not--

AG: And there again I think he still tried his art of compromise. I never remember Mr. Johnson being so radical to the left or right or anything. He always tried to make the best of both worlds. Now, if anything he was certainly more pro-labor, just with his own feelings and convictions.

MG: Okay. [William] Knowland introduced a labor bill and LBJ helped to defeat that as well as amendments. Do you have any recollection of that at all?

AG: Very little. He and Knowland did not have the same relationship that he did later with [Everett] Dirksen. He and Knowland didn't necessarily get along that well or didn't work together that well. I can't give any specifics on that. I've got some notes in my notebook here that I will pull out and transcribe.

(Interruption)

MG: Okay, let's start.

AG: Well, after we left Mission we then drove down to Laredo for dinner--no, we drove over the border and went into Mexico for dinner. Mr. Johnson was driving and we passed this drive-in where you could go and get beer and what have you. So he drove in and the waitress came out to the car and asked what he wanted and he said, "I want *cinco estrellitas*."

(Laughter) He wanted five Lone Star beers, and the girl couldn't under-

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stand what he was talking about. But, anyhow, so we all drank our beer, and then went on down to the restaurant. That was a relaxing evening then; we weren't necessarily doing any business or anything.

There was one night that really Mrs. Johnson--it's the only time I think she ever got mad at me. I was sitting next to Mr. Johnson and I was smoking a cigarette, and I was about the only one in the group that did. Well, Walter did. But he turned to me and he said, "May I have a cigarette?" Well, I didn't have enough sense, you know, to say "No, sir, I didn't think I should." So he took one, and Mrs. Johnson yelled down at me, she said, "You get that cigarette out of his mouth this minute," because he hadn't had a cigarette since 1955. And I asked him then, "Do you ever really want a cigarette?" He said, "Every day of my life." But it was a fun evening.

MG: Well, he would, I'm told, take a puff off someone else's cigarette every now and then. Is that right?

AG: No, I never saw that and if Mrs. Johnson had, she would have had a fit, because she--

MG: This was the only time that--?

AG: Only time I ever remember seeing him do that. Oh, I remember they told me that when he gave up smoking, that he still kept a pack of cigarettes all around the office. He would keep one on the bedside table, one on his desk, you know, everywhere, so that he had it if he wanted it but he knew he had the will power not to smoke.

MG: That's interesting.

Well, let me ask you to go into this spending the summer at the Ranch in some detail.

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AG: Well, the Senate got out early that year [1958] because of the election, and LBJ decided that George Reedy and his family and children and I should take my children and we should live at the Ranch, so the children could get the good education of going to Johnson City school. So I guess we must have gotten out in June or July, and we all drove down in our caravan, as we usually did, so that no one would be driving alone. George and Lillian and their two boys stayed at one of the houses and I stayed with my twins in half of the guest house. Then each morning we would take them to the school bus at Hye for them to go into Johnson City to school. This pleased Mr. Johnson very much. In fact, his cousin was one of their teachers, Mrs. Cox.

MG: Ava Cox?

AG: And he thought that was just the ultimate, that they would be learning from his cousin. I think at the Ranch every single night was a work session. In other words, you worked all day and then you stopped. It was just like clockwork. You'd have a drink at six o'clock and then you'd go in to dinner, and then you'd come back and you'd sit and you'd have a little demitasse of Sanka. Then you'd get up and you had to walk to Cousin Oriole's to get the mile in each night; all of us had to walk, just like a caravan. Then we'd come back and then he'd start working. He'd get on the phone; he'd call Washington; he'd call this senator or that senator at their home or what have you. And staff was always at the Ranch, I mean even though George and I were the only ones who lived there. Mary Margaret was there. I mean Walter was driving in daily and maybe would spend the night. It was just work all summer long.

MG: Well, what did you do with your twins while you were working?

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AG: He had them working. I've got some great pictures of all four of the boys. He put them to work picking pecans from the big pecan trees, you know, by the river. Then he gave each one of them a pig that they had to feed and raise, and then when they got to the right size they had to take them into town and sell them. He had them driving the tractors, believe it or not, and the trucks. Cleaning up. He just wanted them to learn, which was a great experience for the children, all four of them, it really was. As I say, he wanted his staff to be part of his family and he was concerned over their families, too. That always amazed me.

MG: What would he work on there?

AG: He also worked on the Ranch. I mean we'd take rides around and if he'd see the fence that needed fixing, he'd, you know, figure out how much lumber he needed and wire or what have you. At that time, that summer, he really didn't have a foreman. He was without one. He had a couple of farm hands, but he also helped run the Ranch. The cattle had to be fed, and he'd go to auctions; we'd all go to auctions to buy new cattle. Mrs. Johnson was always finding a spot that she could put her wildflowers and they would always argue back and forth on that. He'd say, "This should be where the cow grazes," and she'd say, "No, that's where my wildflowers are going."

MG: This was in the fifties, in 1958, that summer.

AG: Oh, yes.

MG: Was this something she had been doing for a while, do you think?

AG: I don't know the genesis of it, but she always had an eye for the beauty of the Ranch whereas he was thinking of it more from a working ranch [standpoint].

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MG: Would she stand her ground with him on that?

AG: Oh, yes, and she won and you can see the results. It's beautiful.

MG: Yes, that's great.

Well, by this time Jack Kennedy was traveling around the country campaigning for president. Did LBJ have any thoughts on Kennedy's efforts or his own candidacy?

AG: I don't think he had any thoughts of his own candidacy at all at that time. If he did, he didn't express them or anything, I guess. At that time he was known as the second most powerful man in the country, which is something that's never happened since. I mean usually it's the president, and the vice president's the second most powerful. But all during this time the press, everyone, said Johnson was the second most powerful man, so I think he was content with what he was able to do as majority leader. I don't know at that time that he thought Kennedy was--maybe should be president or maybe had what it took to be president. He was young, he was--I remember, you know, in the Senate he. . . . I think Mr. Johnson respected the older senators who had the experience, and felt that perhaps Kennedy was younger and hadn't really worked his way up or earned his position or something.

MG: Right. Sure.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II

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