

INTERVIEW I

DATE: August 18, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: ED GOSSETT

INTERVIEWER: DAVID McCOMB

PLACE: Judge Gossett's Chambers, Room 392, Dallas Courthouse, Dallas,
Texas

Tape 1 of 1

M: Well, first of all, I'd like a little background about you. Where were you born, and when?

G: Well, Mr. McComb, I was born in a sawmill camp in Louisiana, January 27, 1902. When I was six years old, my family moved to a farm in Clay County, Texas, seven miles north of Henrietta.

M: Your folks were farming people?

G: Well, my father was a foreman for the Bonahicks Lumber Company at the time I was born, but he and Mother decided they didn't want to rear a family in a sawmill camp. Both of them had been reared on farms, so they decided to become farmers. I'm the oldest of nine children born to my parents. We lived in poverty, I might say. While I claim to have been reared on a farm, I never enjoyed any part of it, because we were always poverty-stricken. I left home when I was sixteen years old, went to Nebraska, worked for an uncle, finished high school. I never got a nickel from home after I was sixteen. I worked all of my way through the University of Texas. I entered there in 1919 as a freshman. I dropped out one year to teach school. I took a B.A. degree from the University in

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1924 and an LL. B. degree from the University in 1927. I am not proud of my scholastic record, because I really didn't have time to study. I usually had two or three jobs. But I am a little proud of my extracurricular record at the University. I served three years on the University of Texas debating team. I served in all branches of student government. I was a member of the Student Assembly. I was chairman of the Men's Honor Council. My last year I was president of the Student Association. Most of the time I was in the University, I was on the YMCA cabinet. For two years, I was state president of the Baptist Student Union. I was advertising manager of the Texas Ranger for several years. And I went in forensic activities. I was captain of the winning inter-society debate team in 1923.

M: Is this where you debated with George Mahon?

G: No, that was in extemporaneous speaking.

M: Oh, was that at the [University]?

G: George Mahon and I tied for the extemporaneous speaking prize at the University in 1924. I also won the debating prize one year. I know I was quite happy to win at that time. So I'm the one who went in for extracurricular activities rather excessively, particularly in view of the fact that I had to work all my way through school. But I did manage to get both an A.B. and a LL. B. degree from the University.

M: What kinds of jobs did you hold?

G: Well, I worked in stores. I waited on tables. I sold magazines in

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the summertime. I sold Pictorial Review three summers, at which I became rather adept. I did pretty well at it. The last year I was in the University I made fifteen hundred dollars with my outside jobs, which was . . .

M: Good.

G: . . . pretty good money in those days. When I finished the University, I went out to Vernon, Texas, and I became the junior member of the law firm Berry, Stokes, Warlick and Gossett, which was the best law firm in town.

M: How do you spell Warlick?

G: W-A-R-L-I-C-K.

M: You passed the bar in what, 1927?

G: We didn't have to pass the bar. If you had a law degree, you were automatically admitted to the bar in those days.

M: Oh, I see.

G: So that I didn't have to go through that. But I loved Vernon. It became my home town, and after about eight years in the private practice, I served two terms as district attorney in Vernon.

I then moved to Wichita Falls and was elected to Congress from the Thirteenth Congressional District, of which Wichita Falls is the center, in 1938; took my seat January 1, 1939. I married in May, after I was elected to Congress. My first five children were born in Washington. As a matter of fact, the family got so large and the salary was so small that, in August of 1951, I was offered a job as general counsel in Texas for Southwestern Bell Telephone

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Company at twice the salary I was then making as a congressman. So I resigned from the Congress; became general counsel for the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company. And in February of 1967 I had to retire from that job because of age, automatic retirement.

In February of 1968, the Governor, John Connally, appointed me to the district bench in Dallas County, and I am now judge of the Criminal District Court Number 5.

That, in brief, is a thumbnail sketch.

M: Is this district court elected or [appointed]?

G: No, it's elected.

M: That's what I thought.

G: But the sitting judge died and I was appointed to fill the vacancy until the next election. I was elected at the following election.

M: Oh, I see.

Now, you were in Washington when?

G: I was in Washington approximately thirteen years. I was elected to the Seventy-Sixth Congress. I served from January of 1939 until August 1, 1951.

M: Yes. You were there shortly after Lyndon Johnson entered.

G: Lyndon Johnson was elected at a special election, I believe, in 1937. I didn't know Mr. Johnson until I went to Congress.

M: Did you meet him in Congress?

G: Oh, yes. He was then a member of the House, and Texas at that time had a very distinguished delegation, probably still does, but I'd be better acquainted with the ones then. They held more committee

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chairmanships than any other delegation. Mr. Hatton Sumners was the chairman of the Judiciary Committee; Mr. Fritz Lanham was chairman of the House Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds; Mr. [Joseph] Mansfield was chairman of the Committee on Rivers and Harbors; Mr. Marvin Jones was chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture; and Texas probably held some other chairmanships. But they held far more chairmanships than any other congressional delegation at that time.

M: Was Sam Rayburn already a congressman?

G: Well, Mr. Rayburn was then speaker. He had been chairman of the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce. But he was the speaker. No, he was not. He was majority leader when I went, and he succeeded Mr. [William Brockman] Bankhead, who died shortly after I went to Congress.

M: Do you have any early impressions of Lyndon Johnson?

G: Well, he was a very aggressive, active person. He was a man who was always on the move. And in those days--Mr. Johnson changed materially over the years-- he was a little hard to get acquainted with as a member of the House. Apparently, he had too much to do, and most of us didn't have much contact with Mr. Johnson. The most interesting thing that happened involving Mr. Johnson in the Seventy-Sixth Congress: there was a vacancy on the Appropriations Committee to which a Texan was entitled. Committee assignments among the Texas delegation had always been made on the basis of seniority. If there were a vacancy, for instance, on Judiciary,

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the member with the most seniority who wanted it received the delegation endorsement. The delegation endorsement was the equivalent to getting a seat on a particular committee. Mr. Albert Thomas, who had seniority over Mr. Johnson, wanted the vacancy on the Appropriations Committee, but Mr. Johnson also applied. So a meeting of the delegation was called. Mr. Rayburn was the senior member of the delegation, and a secret vote was taken among the Texas members as to who they would endorse, Mr. Johnson or Mr. Thomas. Incidentally, Mr. Rayburn, I believe, was trying to get Mr. Johnson on the Committee. But anyway, the delegation endorsed Mr. Albert Thomas rather than Mr. Lyndon Johnson. That was probably the first, and may have been the bitterest, defeat that Mr. Lyndon Johnson ever suffered in the Congress.

M: Was he heavily defeated in that?

G: Well, the vote was never announced.

M: Oh, it was just . . .?

G: Mr. Rayburn took the poll, and said Mr. Thomas received the majority of the votes. So Mr. Thomas received the endorsement of the delegation. And Mr. Johnson, his name went before the Ways and Means Committee. But the delegation, having endorsed Mr. Albert Thomas, he received the appointment.

M: In something like that, do the people contending for the position go around and try to gather votes for themselves?

G: Oh, yes. They do a lot of arm-twisting, and they campaign for those places.

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M: Yes.

G: Just like you would if you were running for office.

M: Did Johnson campaign for that spot?

G: Yes, he did.

M: But he didn't get it.

G: He didn't get it. It might have been a blessing in disguise for Mr. Johnson, because he might not have run for the Senate had he been on the Appropriations Committee.

M: Now, this is a touchy question. But do you have any idea how people voted in that?

G: I've always pretty well thought I knew how they voted. I figured the old-timers . . . Well, it's a pure guess. I figure that Mr. [Hatton] Sumners, and Mr. [Fritz] Lanham, and Mr. [Joseph] Mansfield, and Mr. [Richard] Kleberg, and Mr. [Milton] West . . . At least, I'm sure those members voted for Mr. Thomas. They stuck by the seniority rule. They believed in it. They themselves were products of the seniority rule.

M: Sure.

G: And, incidentally, I voted for Mr. Thomas at that time. I don't know how the other members voted, but I know Mr. Rayburn was for Mr. Johnson.

M: Did you ever serve on a committee with Lyndon Johnson?

G: No, I never did.

M: Did you work with him on any particular legislation in that period?

G: No. I was on a half dozen minor committees, none of which, I'm

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sure, he was particularly interested in at that time. Being a new freshman member, I had to take what was available, and I was on the Census Committee, and Elections Committee, and Irrigation and Reclamation, and Insular Affairs and Territories. Those committees all later were merged with major committees. When the congressional reorganization occurred, I was put on the Judiciary Committee, which took over-- Oh, I was also on the Immigration and Naturalization [Committee], and that went over to Judiciary under reorganization. So I went with it to the Judiciary Committee.

M: Now you mentioned Sam Rayburn promoting Lyndon Johnson. The books that write about this seem to indicate that Rayburn often did this, that Rayburn boosted Johnson's career.

G: I think he did, and I don't blame Mr. Rayburn. Mr. Rayburn, in my book, was a great man. I loved him and respected him, although I didn't always vote with him. But I think that Lyndon Johnson went to him for advice, which was a wise thing to do, frequently. Whether he took it always, I don't know. But Mr. Rayburn appreciated Mr. Johnson's willingness to take advice from him, and I think that, in the early days at least, Mr. Johnson was pretty well a student of Mr. Sam Rayburn. Sam Rayburn was his mentor, more or less.

M: In the same line, the books also write that Franklin D. Roosevelt also boosted Lyndon Johnson.

G: Oh, he did.

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M: And that Johnson, in turn, supported Roosevelt.

G: That's unquestionably true. At the time Mr. Johnson was elected to the Congress, you remember, in a special election, there were more than half a dozen candidates, and he ran under the Roosevelt banner. He was at that time the state director the National Youth Administration.

M: Right.

G: And he was a hundred percent Roosevelt supporter. That's probably the reason that he was elected at that time, although he might have won otherwise. But it certainly didn't hurt him any being the New Deal candidate at the time time he was running.

M: Did the Texas congressmen at that time go to social events together?

G: Oh, yes.

M: Did they tend to socialize?

G: They all did. There was quite a lot of camaraderie and the spirit of fellowship among them. It was a very pleasant relationship. There was nobody that hated anybody else; we'll put it that way. You liked some people better than you did others, but for myself, I liked all the members of the Texas delegation, and I think all the delegation liked each other.

M: Did Lyndon Johnson take part in any of that socializing?

G: Oh, yes. He was always there, and he was one of the bright young men in the delegation.

M: Do you remember meeting Mrs. Johnson then?

G: Oh, yes. I do. She was a sweet lady. In fact, I think she's

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been Lyndon Johnson's greatest asset over the years.

M: And I've heard people say that before. Now, what makes you say that?

G: She was the sort of a balance wheel. Lyndon has always been impulsive and vigorous and energetic. My guess is, although I'm not close enough to them to know, that she probably slowed him down on occasion when he needed slowing down. (Laughter)

M: Well, now, shortly, Lyndon Johnson tried to reach the Senate, ran in 1941, and lost.

G: That was when he ran against Governor [W. Lee] O'Daniel.

M: Right. Do you remember anything about that?

G: Oh, yes. I remember that campaign. We all thought Lyndon Johnson had won until some late returns came in.

M: Yes.

G: And I voted for Mr. Johnson. I voted for him I think in all of his races, except I didn't vote for him in 1960. I supported the Nixon team in 1960.

M: Johnson finally made it, of course, in 1948, and left the House. Did you have much contact with him?

G: After he became senator? Yes, he became more friendly with the House members after he got to be a senator than he did while he was in the House.

M: Why was that?

G: I don't know. He seemed to change. Evidently, he was happier. He would come to the House frequently. He was always very cordial.

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He would come back to the Cloak Room in the House, and sit around, and visit with the boys.

M: Did you ever have occasion to work with him on, say, a joint committee?

G: I was never on any committees with him and never had occasion to work with him on anything in particular.

M: Did he seem to work with Sam Rayburn even in those days?

G: Oh, yes. Mr. Johnson always worked with Mr. Rayburn.

M: Even though he was in the Senate and Rayburn was in the House.

G: Yes. I think, and again this is a mere assumption--I don't know that Mr. Sam ever asked him to do anything in particular, but I'm sure that anything that Mr. Sam really put the heat on that Mr. Johnson would work with him on it.

M: Yes. Well, I've read, heard, and been told that Lyndon Johnson was a master politician. That is, he knew how to pull strings to get legislation through. He knew who to see and what levers to pull and so on. Now, you've been a congressman. Is that true?

G: After Mr. Johnson went to the Senate, that was more or less true. It was not true in the House. In fact, I don't know of anything in particular that Mr. Johnson tried to get through the House; but he couldn't have manipulated the House as he did the Senate. In fact, the House is a more . . . Well, we'll put it this way: the House is harder to manipulate than the Senate, because of the size and diversity of constituency. You just can't operate in the House the way you do in the Senate. There's not

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that club atmosphere about the House of Representatives that there is about the Senate of the United States, and if you're going to put something over, you can come a lot nearer putting it over in the Senate than you can in the House of Representatives. And Mr. Johnson, I'm sure, was very successful in the Senate. Whereas, I'm not now cognizant of any major thing that he did while he was a member of the House.

M: Yes. He's also said to have been very persuasive. They talk about the Johnson treatment. Did you ever have any of that?

G: Well, I think he was persuasive in small groups, but I've never thought he was persuasive in big groups. I don't think Mr. Johnson was, or at any time became, what I would call an effective speaker.

No one, I think, would contend that he was in the class with Franklin D. Roosevelt, for example. And, apparently, after he became President, he tried to use a little of the Roosevelt technique. Now, he would be better at twisting arms probably than Mr. Roosevelt, but Mr. Johnson's public speeches over national television didn't compare with the fireside chats, for example, of Mr. Roosevelt. He didn't have that warmth in his voice. He sells and sold much better in a small group than he could in a big one.

M: Did you have occasion to see him operate in small groups?

G: Well, I was never in a group that he was trying to sell anything to, but I've talked to lots of people who were. (Laughter)

M: I see. I see.

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G: I know something of his arm-twisting technique at which he was very adept and very successful with.

M: Did you ever campaign for Lyndon Johnson?

G: I didn't actively make speeches. Yes, I buttonholed people on occasion. I've introduced Mr. Johnson at some meetings in Texas. However, I don't contend that I was any great help to him.

In fact, I was never very enthusiastic about Mr. Johnson. And later, after he became president, I became disillusioned with Mr. Johnson, as a matter of fact.

M: Why was that?

G: Well, he was a good majority leader. He apparently did what most Texans would like for him to have done at that time. We regarded him as not necessarily a liberal and not an arch-conservative. We might say a middle-of-the-roader, if you want to use labels.

M: Yes.

G: I've always been a conservative. And I think his Great Society program was a one-way road to dissolution of the American way of life. I think his poverty program is going to haunt us for years to come. Those of us who supported him for president, and I'm one of them, when he was elected in 1964, assumed that he'd be still a somewhat middle-of-the-roader. We thought that he would do some of the things that we approved of. But the people that I associate with, by and large, were very disappointed in his domestic program, not his foreign relations program.

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By and large, conservative Texans approved of his foreign relations program. And thereto lies a very interesting thing. Mr. Johnson obviously didn't know a great deal about foreign relations, and he would seem to listen and take advice, and he had some very good advisors. But on the domestic front, I think he was his own decision-maker, and I think he figured he knew more about the domestic politics than anybody else, and maybe he did. He seemed to conduct himself like a man who wanted to be elected ad infinitum, and instead of doing . . . I don't think he did the things that he really believed in. I think he was doing the things that he thought were politically expedient at the time, and therein lies much of my disappointment in Mr. Johnson as president.

M: Did you agree or disagree with his stand on, say, civil rights?

G: No, I didn't agree with his stand on civil rights.

M: You mentioned . . .

G: I didn't agree with his stand on the poverty program, and I didn't agree with his stand . . .

M: How about education? Aid to education?

G: I think he went too far with that.

M: How about housing? That's another.

G: Well, I think he overdid that. I feel like he obligated the government beyond the government's responsibilities and the government's ability to really deliver. I don't think we can afford all the programs that he started.

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I think a WPA that we had back in the Roosevelt era would be far more practical as a poverty program than the program we now have.

I think the Great Society program was a program of trying to do too many things for too many people. And I think it has created an atmosphere in this country that if I can't make it on my own, the government's going to take care of me. I think it rewards indolence and penalizes diligence, in other words.

M: Did you get involved in Texas state politics?

G: No, I have never really been involved in Texas state politics.

M: The point that I was thinking about was: in 1956 there was a fight between Lyndon Johnson and Rayburn, on one side, and Mr. Allan Shivers, on the other side. Did you ever get involved in that?

G: Well, you mean for control of the state convention? No, I did not. I supported Mr. Shivers for governor.

M: Yes.

G: But I tried to avoid the state conventions as well as the national conventions. I had been to several of both. I had been a delegate to a few, but I never saw the benefit of getting involved in those fights particularly.

M: You mentioned you did not support Lyndon Johnson in 1960.

G: No, I did not. I voted for Mr. Nixon.

M: Did you have any contact with Johnson at all back then during that campaign?

G: I had some contact with him, and I tried to help him get the

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nomination for president. I made the keynote speech at the Dallas County Democratic Convention, and I made a very pronounced, pro-Johnson speech at that time, and I lost some friends in doing it. But it was a big service to Mr. Johnson, which he apparently never recognized, because the opposition that he was expecting in Texas, at that time, had to come out of Dallas or Houston, and there wasn't a squawk out of the Dallas delegation; and I think I was almost fully responsible for that. And even at that time, I pointed out how astute Mr. Johnson was as a politician, and I thought that he was the best bet, would make the best candidate for president, and when he took the vice presidential nomination after Mr. Kennedy received the nomination, I was greatly disappointed. That was one of the reasons that I didn't support the ticket in that election.

M: Did you happen to go to that convention and support him?

G: Yes, I did.

M: Do you remember when it was announced that Johnson was going to run as vice president?

G: Yes, I do.

M: And you were disappointed.

G: I certainly was.

M: Was the Texas delegation generally disappointed?

G: I think they were. I think the whole delegation was disappointed. As a matter of fact, Mr. Kennedy could never have been elected for president without Mr. Johnson at that time, and I assume Mr. Kennedy

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knew that and was smart enough to talk Mr. Johnson into becoming his running mate. I think there would have been almost a Southern rebellion without Mr. Johnson on the ticket at that time.

M: When you went to Los Angeles at the beginning of that convention, were you a [delegate]?

G: I was not a delegate. I was just out there.

M: Oh, I see. Did you do any campaigning for Johnson while you were there?

G: Yes, I did what I could. I knew a lot of the delegates, particularly the southern delegates, and I went to see--and I know--the Mississippi crowd at the behest of some of the Johnson people; tried to talk them into going along, which they didn't do; but I made the effort nevertheless.

M: Yes. Had Kennedy pretty well sewed that convention up?

G: Yes, I think he had.

M: Did you have that impression when you were out there campaigning?

G: I got the impression shortly after I got there.

M: What was it that indicated that to you?

G: Well, the governors of the big states, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Mayor Daley . . . They say that religion has nothing to do with it, and I don't have any religious prejudices frankly, but the big delegations were all headed by Catholics, and they delivered when the time came. They were all set before they got there.

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M: So then you came back. And did you actively support the Nixon ticket? Did you campaign?

G: No, I did not. I just voted.

M: You just voted. Then in 1964 you supported Johnson.

G: I did.

M: And did you campaign for him then?

G: No, I just voted.

M: You just voted again.

G: Of course, I've said my piece, as we all do, when we make up our minds. Most of us do. But I didn't make any speeches, or write any letters, or do anything in particular. I did join the Johnson Club; contributed a thousand dollars to it.

M: (Laughs) That is something.

G: Well, that was more than just a token to me.

M: Yes.

G: And incidentally, I tried later to get an appointment with Mr. Johnson to talk to him about electoral reform. I was somewhat the father of the electoral reform movement and had done a great deal of work on it. I didn't go directly to Mr. Johnson, but I did go to Mr. Ed Clark, who's the big henchman in Texas, and ask him to make an appointment for me, and he said that Mr. Johnson wasn't particularly interested, he thought I was too conservative. So I was never able to get in the White House during the Johnson Administration.

M: You never saw Johnson then?

G: No, not after he became president.

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- M: You might mention your position on electoral college reform.
- G: Well, I was the joint author, with Henry Cabot Lodge, of what's known as the Lodge-Gossett Amendment. It passed the Senate in 1950 by a vote of 64 to 27.
- M: This was to distribute the vote.
- G: This was the proportional system. There are three systems now under consideration: the district system, the proportional system, and the direct vote system. And I had done a lot of work, made a lot of speeches, wrote an article for the Reader's Digest, came out in Digest, on electoral reform. I was on the Electoral Reform Commission of the American Bar Association. I'm sure I have made more speeches on the subject than anybody in the United States, except probably Carl Mundt, who is the proponent of the district system.
- M: Right.
- G: Well, I think Mr. Johnson would . . . In fact, he endorsed electoral reform left-handedly, and I wanted him to do a little more than that, but I was never able to talk to him about it.
- M: So he never supported you on that point?
- G: Well, no.
- M: Yes. Did you have any contact with him when he was vice president?
- G: Yes, I saw him ever so often.
- M: This was in Washington?
- G: Yes. When I'd go to Washington.
- M: Was this on business matters or just social calls?

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G: No, I never asked him to do anything in my life, never called on him for a thing.

M: Did he ever do you any favors?

G: No.

M: Did he ever appoint you, when he was president, to any committee?

G: He never appointed me to anything. I didn't seek appointment to anything.

M: Did you have correspondence with him?

G: Oh, I've had letters, just social letters. Got his autographed pictures, as did all the other Texas members of Congress and ex-members of Congress, I'm sure.

M: Were you surprised when Lyndon Johnson chose not to run again in 1968?

G: At the time I was, and after reflecting on it, I was not surprised, because I think it was one of the smartest things he ever did. I didn't anticipate that he would do it.

M: Why not?

G: I thought Lyndon Johnson was a man of great self-confidence and, you might say, egotism, and I thought he would certainly want to be re-elected. I don't know what all of his reasons were, but I'm sure they were good reasons for not running again. I don't think he would have been re-elected, and I think he felt he would not be re-elected.

M: Is that the reason--?

G: And he had been subjected to a lot of abuse by the press and people

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who had no right to abuse him, actually. And I think that cut him deeply, and I think, all in all, he decided that it was time for him to bow out.

M: So you think that was a smart move.

G: I think it was. I think it was very smart.

M: Have you had any contact, incidentally, with him since his retirement from the presidency?

G: I haven't seen him.

M: Now, you've known him for a long time. At least, you've observed him. Have you any thoughts about whether or not he's changed over the years? And if so, what way?

G: No, I don't think he's changed particularly.

M: He's still aggressive?

G: I think he's still the same person he was when he was first elected to Congress. I mean, I don't think he's changed any, except he's grown, of course, in knowledge, and times have changed, but basically, I don't think his philosophy has changed any. In fact, that's probably one of my criticisms of Mr. Johnson. I don't think he ever had any particular philosophy. I think he's the best politician, or the most astute politician perhaps, that we ever had in the White House. But you know, Disraeli's definition: a politician is a man who thinks about the next election; a statesman, about the next generation. And I think Mr. Johnson was more concerned about the next election than he was about the next generation. And that's the fault that I find with him.

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M: Well, now, let me conclude this with an open-ended question. Is there any further comment or statement that you wish to make about Lyndon Johnson and his political views?

G: No, I don't want to get into the arena of being critical of Mr. Johnson. I still regard him as a friend. If he and I met, we'd be very cordial. I don't dislike him in particular. But I was greatly disappointed in his performance as president, and for reasons I've more or less generalized about.

M: Well, I wish to thank you then for the interview and your time.

G: You're quite welcome, sir. I'm afraid I haven't been very helpful to you.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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