INTERVIEW I

DATE: February 5, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN GRONOUSKI

INTERVIEWER: Paige E. Mulhollan

PLACE: Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

M: Let's begin simply by identifying you.

G: I'm John A. Gronouski, resident of Wisconsin.

M: You've been out of Wisconsin since 1963, however, when you became postmaster general for the Kennedy Administration. Is that correct?

G: I became postmaster general effective September 30, 1963 under Jack Kennedy, President Kennedy, and of course served under him until his death a month and a half later, about.

M: And you were in that position until 1965?

G: Interestingly enough the postmaster generalship is the only cabinet position which requires a reappointment every four years, so I didn't simply remain as the other cabinet officers did, but rather was reappointed by Lyndon Johnson in January of 1965 for another term as postmaster general. It's just a little oddity in history.

M: I didn't know that.

G: I've been appointed twice postmaster general and once ambassador by presidents.

M: That ambassador appointment came when, in 1965?

G: The ambassador appointment came in--I think it was around the middle of August that we discussed it, announced it a couple of weeks later, but it became effective I believe November 3, 1965. And I arrived in Poland on November 30, 1965.

M: You stayed in that post then until when this year?

G: I stayed in that post until May 3l, 1968 at which time I resigned with the approval of the President in order to participate in Hubert Humphrey's political campaign.

I think it might be useful to indicate the degree of personal relationship that existed. Actually, I hardly knew Lyndon Johnson. I had met him one time when we brought him out to Wisconsin for a JJ [Jefferson-Jackson] dinner in 1962. I had met him in the one cabinet meeting that I had participated in under President Kennedy before his death. I probably met him once or twice other than that, but I would have to say that I knew little of him and he knew little of me. He knew a lot less of me than I knew of him, of course, because of his public stature, at the time of President Kennedy's death.

The only real exchange we had resulted from a trip I took down to Texas shortly after I came to the cabinet, at which time I spoke in Austin for RalphYarborough, who at the time wasn't seeing eye-to-eye on all matters with the then-Vice President.

M: At that time and probably any other time.

G: At any rate, we sat in the cabinet meeting thereafter, the Vice President--Lyndon Johnson being vice president at the time--passed over a note to me saying, "You did a good job down in Austin, I hear." And that was about the only personal thing that had gone on between us. I mention it only to emphasize that I came to Washington as a cabinet officer

six weeks before the President's death--Jack Kennedy's death--and all of a sudden was serving under a man who didn't know me at all and I knew very little of.

M: How soon after the assassination did he get in touch with you person ally to talk about the future of what you were going to be doing for him?

G: Not individually. I of course on that fateful day, among the other cabinet members, met him at the airport when the body was brought back--Jack Kennedy--but I had no personal contact with him that night. He did call a cabinet meeting for the next day, Saturday, I think 3:00 p.m. Saturday afternoon, and at that time he made the observation which I have heard him make on two or three other occasions, that one of the great legacies that John Kennedy left him was a fine cabinet, and he hoped that they would all stay on.

Adlai Stevenson irritated me that day, by the way, and for this kind of a project I think I should make reference to it.

M: Don't ever let me cut you off on anything.

G: Adlai was sitting next to me, being the UN rep, and I happened to have my chair next to his. I thought Stevenson went out of his way to be boorish when he made a rather lengthy speech which he had obviously prepared in which he assured the President of the United States of the loyalty of the cabinet and, "As the oldest ranking Democrat in the room and one who ran for president twice, I can assure you I'll give you my support," which I thought was a bit redundant for a man of stature. I felt that that probably should have been understood or said in a much more lower case form.

M: Did Mr. Johnson react in any noticeable way?

G: No. Actually--of course he was terribly moved by this whole thing, President Johnson was. And it was a difficult meeting for him, that was pretty clear. It was done in a very solemn and businesslike way, and really not a great deal of business done in a meeting of this sort except an assurance of his interest in us remaining a part of the team.

M: You hadn't been in the Post Office Department long enough under Kennedy really I suppose to have much of a way of comparing the way it was in the Kennedy Administration to the way it was in the Johnson Administration.

G: Only in one sense. And this is partly supported by conversations subsequently with cabinet members who were my colleagues and had of course served under the full Kennedy term. But there seemed to be a very real difference in Johnson and Kennedy's attitude toward the role of the cabinet. I felt under Kennedy in the very short time I was there after a series of telephone calls from Kenny O'Donnell and on a couple of occasions from Bobby [Kennedy], who was involved in acting the role of president, that this was not going to be a very pleasant assignment, because I felt that the staff at the White House was given a much more significant role than I as a cabinet member would welcome at that point in time. That was my initial impression in just the six weeks I was there. Of course a lot happens in the first six weeks you're there, including the fact that we had some change of personnel and so on and a very strong interest of the White House staff on what happens to certain personnel and that sort of thing.

This contrasted sharply to what I felt was the attitude of Johnson which was expressed I think in the second cabinet meeting, where he had all of his staff in at the cabinet meeting, and he had them all stand up and introduced all the White House staff to

the cabinet members and vice versa. Then he made a declaration, rather forcefully, that the cabinet members were to let him know at any time if the staff called them for any purpose other than to convey a message from the President or ask a question. I think it was a very clear and positive statement that the staff was not going to run your department--you were going to run them.

Now this was sometimes honored in the breach as time went on, but I felt that there was a pretty good level of confidence, a higher level of confidence and authority placed in the hands of the cabinet officer, under Johnson than probably would have under Kennedy. As I say, this is based on a rather short tenure under Kennedy but is supported by conversations I had along these lines from time to time with different people who had served under Kennedy longer than myself.

As I say, the fact of the matter is that to a great extent he did give us considerable latitude, and the staff did not interfere excessively, in my judgment. I make a point of this because it's something that has been discussed very recently since Nixon took over, and it almost looked like a replay of something that had gone through my mind; Nixon was going to give the cabinet members authority, whereas Johnson did not. I think Johnson did much more than most people realize. Now that doesn't mean that we didn't have our arguments with the Budget Bureau and lose them, and of course technically the director of the Bureau of the Budget is on the President's staff. It doesn't mean that Marv Watson didn't occasionally call or someone else and exert a bit of pressure.

M: He may have been on the other side of that before he was through.

G: Yes. But the overall pattern I thought was pretty good, and I felt pretty clearly that I was in charge and I was not operating under the jurisdiction of a member of the President's White House staff. I had a very clear feeling whereas I immediately got the impression that I'd better clear it with Kenny or Bob before I made any substantial decision, or I'd get in trouble with the White House under Kennedy. That difference I think existed.

M: Did Johnson ever indicate any really detailed interest personally in the operation of the Post Office Department? Was there anything about it that interested him enough that he brought it to your attention or made it clear?

G: He certainly did. He was always concerned because ***Life*** magazine was getting away with murder and Mrs. Jones down the street was paying five cents for a stamp. He seemed to have a good understanding of a lot of things that surprised me. We had at one point in time a big argument over the peepholes that they built in post offices, and this was being argued up on the Hill and elsewhere. This is the famous [Edward] Long committee--the Missouri Long. I was at some kind of a cocktail party at the White House, I think, when the President said to me, "Say, John, how much do those peepholes cost?" That just caught me absolutely cold. Clearly he had taken an interest in the Post Office in his thirty-some years in Congress and not just in this particular but in many instances he made it pretty clear that he knew what he was talking about when we discussed postal matters, particularly in the budget time. On two occasions we went down to the Ranch around Christmas and discussed the budget, and each time I felt that I had to be pretty well prepared because he knew an extraordinary amount about the Post Office as compared to what I would expect of

a president of the United States normally. But I think it's understandable from his experience.

By the way, I might say another thing that ought to be part of some record. Naturally you get curious about a new president, so I pulled the Lyndon Johnson file--Congressman and Senator Lyndon Johnson file--after he became president of the United States, or maybe even while he was vice president, just to get an idea of what kind of requests over his congressional career we had gotten from him. I was quite surprised to find that the Post Office in terms of the records that it has kept--it keeps pretty good records--did not have anything but the standard form letter that Lyndon Johnson sent over on appointments which simply said, "I have been asked to look into"--I can't remember the letter per se, but it's a form letter which simply calls our attention to the possibility of somebody being looked at and in no sense indicated the kind of insistence and the kind of pressure you often get from congressional and Senate sources. I was quite surprised, as a matter of fact. I expected him to have quite a thick file and to have been quite adamant. God knows, I suppose things went on by private telephone conversations and so on, but certainly the written record indicates nothing but the most routine kinds of support that any cabinet officer would interpret as leaving the matter pretty much up to his own discretion.

M: You said you dealt with him a couple of times at the Ranch. This is subjective, I appreciate, but did he come across differently when he operated in that environment as compared to when he operated in the White House, say, or in Washington?

G: Of course he was always bigger than life, still is. Physically. And of course I don't have to embellish the story that has so often been told that he's quite a different personality when

he's with you or with a small group than when he's on TV. One of the things that impressed you when you were privately with him whether at the White House or the Ranch was his total dedication--I don't know if I'd say dedication--total enthusiasm for the work of the job he was doing. One night we went boating with him, had a picnic, and sat up till about two o'clock having drinks. And, my God, the whole night through was nothing but business. Out on that boat, when he's steering that boat, he's still talking shop. That was his relaxation apparently as well as his work.

I might say that during one of these boat rides I probably for the first and last time gave an order to a president of the United States. I can't think of the girl's name now, she was his secretary, married somebody. [Vicki McCammon McHugh]

M: Married Jack Valenti?

G: No, after that. This was back in l965, something like that, l966. Anyway, very pretty girl. But anyway she was his secretary. And her husband I think went on the Subversive Board. But she was water skiing, and he was towing her around with this motorboat, and it was a very choppy day. She fell off, and he was backing up to her, and I thought he was going to chop her to pieces, so I turned to the President and said, "Stop!" And he stopped. Then he kind of looked at me and kind of growled, but he never said a word. But I think it may be one of the few times the President was ordered by one of his underlings.

M: The Secret Service claims to be the only one who can do that.

G: But that was a gut reaction because I didn't want the President of the United States to be cutting up this pretty girl. But that's a little sidelight in history, I guess.

M: That's the kind of thing we like to get.

What about the background or circumstances of your appointment as ambassador to Poland?

G: Let me tell you another little story that I think is a very funny one and has a lot of pathos to it, too, and I think says something about the man. About the early part of January, I guess it was, or the latter part of December, right after he took office, Sid Bishop who was my deputy that I inherited resigned. So I called the President and told him that my deputy had resigned, and beyond that I had a candidate for his replacement. The President said, "John, I've been running for president for thirty-five years, and now I have my first good appointment coming up and you're telling me how to make it." I said, "Mr. President, your appointment is my appointment. Your choice is my choice, but let me at least write you a couple of pages to explain to you why I think my choice ought to be your choice." "Fine." And that's how Fred Belen became deputy postmaster general.

M: I was wondering if this was Belen. I had talked to him.

G: Fred was my candidate at the time.

M: He was a career man, wasn't he?

G: He had been on the House Committee for about twelve years, twelve or fourteen years, legal counsel for the House Post Office Committee. When Kennedy came in he brought him over as chief of operations. So he was career in a sense.

M: He had been with the Post Office in some capacity.

G: He was on the Post Office Committee, and he was a handy guy to have around, a very knowledgeable fellow. I'm sure you'll be talking to him.

M: Yes, we have already. So Mr. Johnson did appoint your man, or he saw it your way.

G: The story is--I don't know where I picked this up and I don't even know if it's true, but I understand Marv Watson was the man that the President had in mind at that time. Marv was still back with the steel company.

M: Maybe Marvin did better by waiting. He came in as the head of it.

G: That's right. But at any rate, I'm not sure about the Watson thing, but somewhere along the line I recall somebody telling me that it was Watson. Belen has probably told you the story, too. But Belen was over in the President's office, having been called over there. I was in--my wife was breaking a champagne bottle on an atomic submarine in Groton, Connecticut. About seven o'clock at night I got a call in my hotel room--we had a big party going there--and it was the President calling me, saying, "I've got Fred Belen with me. I've made him deputy postmaster general. Don't write such good letters anymore."

M: So he not only appointed your man, but remembered the circumstances that led to your recommendation.

G: And then he put Fred on. Well, I thought that was a little insight, among other things. Again this is true. This is a pretty high-level appointment, under secretary or deputy, and yet he did appoint the man that I [recommended]. He didn't know me from Adam, but he nonetheless appointed the man that I wanted over and above the man that he had hoped to bring in.

M: Your man had no particular political significance either.

G: No. It wouldn't have made any difference to him really politically, not that Belen couldn't have gotten support from Congress and so on, but at that point in time it wouldn't have made any significant political difference to the President.

The other thing I wanted to observe, just as a sidelight. My kids, when I was sworn in as postmaster general, held the Bible, and they I think had done the same thing when President Johnson swore me in. In both cases the family went into the Oval Office. But the kids are left with very little impression of Jack Kennedy, who had really not paid much attention to them, whereas in the Johnson case they became great fans of President Johnson. He took them over to his desk, he opened desk drawers, he pulled out trinkets, gave them this, that and the other thing, and treated them like little princesses. Again, that says something about the guy. He made it an event in those kids' lives, which I think has something to say for him.

I might say another thing, too. I don't know how my timing is on this; I suppose there should be some chronology here.

M: Anybody who uses these things must of necessity check dates and things.

G: But two or three things happened in our relationship that I think ought to be part of the record. One had to do with a fellow named David Rabinowitz. At any rate I'll identify him. He was appointed to the Madison [Wisconsin] District Court by Jack Kennedy. David Rabinowitz had a background as lawyer for the UAW over during the long drawn-out Kohler Company strike in Wisconsin. Jack Kennedy appointed him judge about the beginning of 1963, and he served as judge in an interim appointment some way. I'm not sure how this worked technically, but anyway he was sitting judge without confirmation; he never was confirmed. The President died; the Congress adjourned; and of course he was off the bench, because if you're not confirmed during the term of Congress--well, he's ten months on the bench by now. His confirmation was held up by [Senator James] Eastland

and I think [Samuel J.] Ervin, though this would have to be checked. But it's available. I talked to many people on the Hill about it, including Olin [D.] Johnston from South Carolina, who supported him. But Rabinowitz never did get confirmed. This was a great tragedy I felt because in the first place I felt Rabinowitz was being persecuted, partly I felt though a little anti-Semitism, but primarily because of his association with a very controversial labor case. The ***Chicago Tribune*** was very adamant against his appointment, and had used all the influence possible--sent investigators in and everything else to Wisconsin. And this was affecting Dave very much personally; he'd given up a thriving law practice, sold his home, come down to Madison--a ten-month's judge and no confirmation. I had I think probably sent a memo over from Wisconsin, of course, or talked to a member of the President's staff or something about the possible appointment of--

M: This is Johnson now you're talking about.

G: Yes, President Johnson. He had to be reappointed before twelve-thirty on the day the Congress went back into session, or it was somehow over.

Again, I don't know the technical details of it. But twelve-thirty was the break point. On that day when Johnson went over for the opening of the session--details are hazy but it can be filled in if anybody's interested. But at any rate, I was very much disturbed. I didn't know Johnson very well; Dave had become a very controversial person. This was on a Sunday night. I couldn't sleep that night because I realized that I hadn't really gone all out for this fellow, that I did have a button on my phone which would get to the President, and I didn't use it up till now, and I didn't think I could live with myself if I didn't do it.

At any rate, at ten o'clock that morning in the office I pushed the button and asked for the President, and he came to the phone. We talked for at least forty minutes on the case. I explained why I called and how I felt that the only thing that was decent was to reappoint him, and went into it in much more detail than I can recall now. He was just as thoughtful and considerate and discussed the pros and cons with me, obviously had given a lot of thought to it. And as I say we talked about forty minutes about it, and it made me feel very good that he gave me forty minutes before he was going over at twelve-thirty to discuss the case. And as I say I really didn't know him very well, and he certainly didn't know me very well.

But at any rate I was standing on the steps I guess while he was coming into the House--coming over to the Speaker's chamber, and he sought me out. He saw me and he took me by the hand and he pulled me over and he said, "Well, you talked me into it, John. I appointed Rabinowitz a half hour ago." Now, I'm not sure I talked him into it, knowing him, but it was awfully good that he [did it]. I think this was a pretty statesmanlike thing for him to do anyway. It was a Kennedy appointment that the Congress had rejected, or at least had not confirmed, a Kennedy man, promoting him, and yet he finally did it.

Dave Rabinowitz never did get confirmed, and Jim Doyle now has the spot. Dave has suffered some very real personal tragic effects from this whole thing, but to the extent possible President Johnson did what he could on the case. I thought that was somewhat a measure of the man.

Secondly, I'd gotten some very--this now goes another year later or so, but probably the summer of 1965, in fact, I'm probably at March of 1965 now--when we had a move on

to hire an awful lot of kids in the summer. The Post Office had a quota of, I don't know, ninety thousand or something. It was a large number; I may be way off on that, but it was a large number. And this was a real problem of course in hiring that many in a short time, and Fred Belen suggested that he call the Democratic congressmen and get suggestions from them. Of course this was patronage, and probably shouldn't have been treated as patronage, in retrospect. But Fred thought this was a great idea, and I as usual had about ninety things to do, and this time I didn't give it enough thought and okayed it and said, "Go ahead." Well, the reporter from the Iowa paper, [Nathan] Kotz I think his name was, of the Des Moines paper, but at any rate he made a big issue of this, and [Albert H.] Quie, the congressman from Minnesota, and so on. And I got in some hot water. Well, I realized after thinking about it that I was getting into hot water and probably made the wrong judgment. I said, "Fred, you'd better call all the congressmen, because we're going to have all kinds of jobs anyway we're not going to be able to fill, and it's pretty clear that they can make a case." So Fred called--by the way, we had cleared this whole thing with Larry O'Brien, acting for the President over in the White House. At any rate I don't want to go too much into this case except to say that for a long period we got some very bad press out of this thing, which doesn't help the administration. I talked to the President about it, I had called him and told him about it and kept him informed by memorandum and by at least two or three phone calls telling him when the bitter blows were coming. And subsequent to that I talked to him about it at the Ranch. His reaction when I talked to him about it at the Ranch was, "Well, why shouldn't you call Democrats?"

But at any rate on this and probably a good many other occasions there was an opportunity for the President I think to go into one of these tantrums you read about, but I never found it. I've always been very careful talking in public about this ever since Jack Valenti's famous speech in Boston where he "sleeps a little better at night," but I've always been a little perplexed, because I've always found the guy to be gentle and considerate. I've *never* run into one of these rages. I don't know why. I may have lived a charmed life, but I couldn't vouch that he ever treated anybody other than with the utmost consideration, from personal experience. And there was some provocation because I did goof on this postal thing. It wasn't anything really wrong, but it was just politically bad judgment and shouldn't have been handled the way I handled it. I don't know, as I say, what went on with other people, but in the period that I served under him I never had anything but the warmest kind of consideration. I've never felt at any time that he was a rough guy to work for, which is strange considering the stories. Now, as I say, I didn't have access to him that a staff man does, in all kinds of moods and so on, so some different kinds of reactions might come from others, but for me I can't find him to be the curmudgeon that you hear about.

Before we get to my ambassadorship, there is one which tells a little bit about the *modus operandi* of this guy. I think this was in the fall of 1964, and there was a big economy drive on and the President wanted to I guess get under a hundred billion dollar budget. The Budget Bureau had slashed my budget pretty hard, to the point where I felt it was too much. I had come up with possibilities but had recommended against a lot of them, such as closing windows an hour earlier in the post offices and things of this sort. And there was about a seven or eight million-dollar item which is practically peanuts for an

operation that's six billion dollars at the time. Eight million is less than a half day's wages in the Post Office. But at any rate the Budget Bureau over my recommendations had insisted that we close the windows. There were two major items: that we close the windows or keep the windows open in the post offices a shorter period, close some all-night windows, which hits the press very much by the way because that's where they send overnights and columns and so on; closing some of the all-night windows in the big cities, shortening the Saturday schedules, closing the windows a half-hour or an hour earlier at night.

That's one aspect of the proposition; the other was to eliminate parcel post deliveries on one day a week, and this would save as I recall seven or eight million dollars. It was a proposition that I had submitted to the Budget Bureau on request, but which I had strongly recommended against. But they had insisted upon it. So I asked the President, I went over to his office to protest this. I said, "I can buy all kinds of cuts, but this gets it down to the nitty-gritty, and we're going to have every paper in the country blasting us on this. It just isn't worth the candle--you know there's a certain point where I think the budget cutting has to stop." And he gave me a little lecture on the difficulties that he has with all the budgets, but beyond that he got me into a real bind. He said, "John, really now, forget the reaction of the public and everything else. Just think in terms of a manager of the Post Office. Do you really think that as the manager of the Post Office you're really hurting public service that much by cutting this out?" And my reaction was, "Well, actually not an awful lot, but the public isn't going to buy that and the press isn't going to buy it." He said, "Don't worry about that. I'm asking you is it really going to hurt the service much?" And I said, "Not an

awful lot, it's going to hurt some, but not an awful lot." He said, "Well, then do it. Let me worry about the politics and the press."

I make this point because I've made a point often with personal friends that usually surprises them. I think one of the weaknesses of Johnson as a president was that he was too apolitical. I think this is reflected in the kind of thing that happened that afternoon when I went over to see him. He should not have cut that item.

M: From a political standpoint?

G: From a political standpoint but more than that I think. I think that the presidency is a political office, and it's little things like this that accumulated and created trouble for him later on in big things. I don't think it's necessarily--well, I say positively that I think it was bad that he didn't make these political concessions: I think this is a weakness in his presidency, a weakness in that he was not political enough. The point I'm making essentially is that--oh, the other thing of course is the decay of the Democratic National Committee, which was another example of. . . . Why? Because this was political. And once he got into that presidency, I don't know what he was before, but once he got the presidency I'm just as convinced as can be that he resigned from the Democratic Party, in effect.

Now that's putting this a little strong but--and I think if I had to name--I'm a great supporter of his policies from Vietnam on down the line. I think his policies were right policies and will be borne out ultimately, not every "t" crossed and "i" dotted but basic line of policy. I think under his administration America had an opportunity to mature--it didn't quite do it--as a world power. It can't avoid being a world power, but being a world power

and being mature about it is another thing; and I think he gave the framework for this to happen and he undercut his effectiveness in this by not being political enough in his operation of the presidency. I think that a lesson from Johnson that any president has to learn in the future, if he understands what went on in this administration, is that you can't take politics out of American government.

M: You know, that's a very common criticism of presidents in the past, like William Howard Taft for example, that he wasn't a good enough politician to be a good president. And yet I've never heard anybody say that about Lyndon Johnson.

G: I feel very strongly about this; I think this was his Achilles heel, that he left politics behind when he walked through the White House doors and that was his mistake.

So many of the things he did, and I can't recount them now, but so many of the things he did, it struck me so often, that this may be the straight dope, but by God, it isn't the way to play it, you know. Because we're in a political society and we have to run this country. The country is run effectively when it is run by political animals. And nobody came to that office more endowed with the capacity to be a political operator.

But I wanted to get that point in, because it surprises people when I say it, and I feel it very strongly: that his greatest weakness as president was his abandonment of the role of the politician when he got into the office.

By the way, I was very active in the campaign of 1964 for the President. I campaigned thirty-two states; I've got many volumes of speeches I gave.

M: How is that done? When an incumbent president runs a campaign like this, does he solicit the political aid of this cabinet people directly, or do you just decide you want to do this and set it up through the DNC or what?

G: Well, it varies I suppose tremendously with individuals, and with the resources that the individuals command. Actually, the Post Office is the greatest political organization in the world. It's also more than a political organization; it's a business organization today, and this is what it primarily is. And politics plays a very small role in the Post Office really: that's another story. But when you want to mobilize the Post Office for political purposes, it's a great organization to do so, and this you want to do when a campaign is on. You cut corners very often with the Hatch Act, too, I might say; this isn't news to anyone, it's just not talked about very often. I don't mean to say we do anything. What I'm really saying is that when you're making a speech some of the postal employees in that area drum up some trade for you and what have you; you have people in the regional offices and in the post offices that have a natural affinity for politics. I think we had six or eight people who had been advance men for Stevenson working for the Post Office, and so on. And inevitably in the time of a campaign the excitement runs pretty high in the Post Office, and these people do mobilize. It isn't nearly as formal as somebody might suspect, but there is a clear political organization extant that you draw upon as you need it, just because these people are around the country and are your cohorts in the operation of the Post Office and at the same time are good solid Democrats.

So when--I say this by way of background, that I found it more effective to work through my own people than to go through the DNC. I tried to work with the DNC, and it

never worked. They fouled me up most of the time, so after the first few tries I just ignored the DNC except letting them know where I was going, and when. We kept them supplied continously with my itinerary. But we did it all through the Post Office, and I spoke, as I say, in thirty-two states, traveled 127,000 scheduled air miles plus other air miles and other miles, so I participated very actively in the campaign of 1964. And I think that probably while he'd never thank me for it or never directly indicated that he even knew I was out working like a dog for him, I think probably he did know it; one doesn't miss these things. He took Bob Hardesty, my speechwriter, right after the campaign.

M: It sounds like he even read what you were saying.

G: At any rate, I think that may very well have been the reason why when the time came to reappoint me, I was reappointed. I don't know, he didn't know me from Adam, and I often wondered why he would not bring somebody in that he knew better than he knew me. But he did reappoint me, and it may very well have been related to my campaign efforts; I have an affinity for this anyway. But that's again interjected simply because--I had assumed that my days in the cabinet were numbered, my days in the administration were numbered--he had no reason to retain me, rationally. And he did retain me. He subsequently--we'll get into that later--shifted me to Warsaw, but I didn't have reason to expect until after the campaign when I, I think, contributed to his campaign, I didn't have any reason to suspect that he'd keep me on. But he had a great desire, *too* great a desire in my judgment, to go along with the Kennedy appointees.

M: I was going to say--by that time, a lot of the Kennedy people were leaving.

G: I think he should have dumped most of us. They weren't leaving really, they didn't leave.

M: Not by then. It was during 1965.

G: But you know there were several of them that should have helped him in the campaign and never did, and they should have been--if I were to have been president, I would have knocked them out of there.

M: Do you think they were not rendering loyal service?

G: I think any cabinet member that isn't specifically asked by the president not--or the president for example, and the Treasury--the presidents generally don't want Treasury people, the secretary of the treasury, or the secretary of state or secretary of defense to enter into extremely partisan campaigns. On the other hand, they expect those people to take on nonpartisan speaking engagements which put them in a favorable light. But the other cabinet members have no reason at all not to take dates, and apparently very few of them did an awful lot in that 1964 campaign.

M: They might have felt that there was not much need to.

G: Well, who knows? But all I'm suggesting is that I think it says something about Johnson that he kept the Kennedy crew on, three of them right to the end. And the notion that he would, again as the consummate political man, kick out other people's buddies and bring in his own just didn't happen as a matter of fact. Now actually this last year in 1968, there was a very high proportion of political appointees in the State Department. It surprised me when I saw the figures. But except for this quite marked contrast to the past that happened this year, I was always impressed that he held on to people that were not his people too long, and secondly that he relied too heavily on the Civil Service in promotion to top jobs.

M: Too heavily?

G: I mean, just for example, to put John Macy, competent as he is, in that job at the White House with an important role in the selection of cabinet or agency heads--I think it's just ridiculous.

M: Again, because he doesn't have the political savvy--

G: Macy hasn't got a political bone in his body. Again, we have a political system and to put a lot of nonpolitical eunuchs into policy-making jobs just doesn't give you the coordinated administration that you have to have if you're going to have an effective administration.

M: Wasn't there a good deal during this time, too, of former Kennedy people who were more or less consciously demeaning Johnson around town--cocktail party gossip, dinner table gossip, this type of thing?

G: Yes, but I have to say that I didn't find that coming out of the cabinet; I didn't find any of that coming out of the cabinet, as a matter of fact.

M: These were Kennedy's lower-level people.

G: These were people--well, personal friends of mine, because of course I came up through the Kennedy route. These were personal friends of mine that were very disdainful of Johnson, and that helped create the unfavorable impact and image.

M: I was going to say--how much does that type of thing contribute to hurting his presidency?

G: Oh, it certainly does. I think probably his presidency was hurt more than one would like to believe by the intellectual establishment, which has such a rapport with the news establishment, the [Tom] Wickers and the [Joseph] Krafts and the [Walter] Lippmanns, and the TV commentators particularly--Sandy Vanocur and that group.

The intellectual community is a story in itself; I gave a speech about them back in 1967. But for reasons that were I think quite irrational the intellectual community just--he was a no-no, he was not a part of the crowd, never had been. He just was not acceptable for a whole lot of reasons that I don't have to go into here, partly because Camelot was dead, et cetera, you know, and he has taken their boy's place. I might say the intellectuals didn't accept Jack Kennedy in 1960, the same way.

M: They were still with Stevenson then.

G: I was responsible in Wisconsin to get a list of professors for Jack Kennedy, and after talking to five hundred or so professors personally and by telephone, I had seven on my list. These same people idolized Kennedy three years later.

M: I was going to say, there was a remarkable change in three years.

G: And hated Johnson. These same people were really Humphrey people in Wisconsin, but in 1968 you couldn't get them to sign a paper for Hubert. What I'm saying is the intellectual community is not politically trustworthy, and not politically mature, and too much taken by the attitude of their leaders--the [Arthur] Schlesingers, [John Kenneth] Galbraiths, and so on--and have abdicated what has long been regarded as the responsibility of the intellectual communities, to independently evaluate personalities and issues, and in effect went along with the crowd. The crowd, the establishment, the intellectual establishment's dictum was, "He's a no-goodnik," and therefore anybody who said he was a "goodnik" was in trouble with his peers and therefore he either didn't say it or didn't even think it. This is room for a study all in itself.

But what I'm saying is Johnson never had a chance with this crowd. He was politically dead before he met them, and they even resented the fact that he passed the Civil Rights Bill and Jack didn't. And he just had a hell of a time, is what I'm saying; and I think this plus the fact that he didn't mobilize political resources around the country on his side combined to leave him without much support at a certain point in time.

M: Did the Kennedy family get involved in any of this intellectual establishment activity?

G: Oh, I think so. But it's pretty hard to document it. Certainly my deep resentment toward Bob Kennedy developed not until the early part of l967 when I'd gone through a long period of genuine effort to get peace talks started. I was reasonably sure that Bob Kennedy, after a tour in France where he talked to Chip [Charles E.] Bohlen and others, had been briefed on this whole process. And I felt the statements he made when he came back, he made to the French press and he made when he came back, were so clearly in conflict with the facts that he ought to have known or could have found out, and so belittling of the real efforts that were being made behind the scenes and necessarily quietly to get talks going, that I became very--perhaps felt so strongly about this that it probably was the reason why I resigned my ambassadorship to come back and help Hubert. Because I don't think he gave him a fair shake; I think it was a hatchet job from the beginning. And I thought the country deserved more. I understand politics, I've been in it a long time, but in a matter so critically important as finding a solution to the Vietnam War, I thought the country deserved better than Bob Kennedy was giving the country. Particularly when it hit so much to home where I lived, because I had this Paris affair and it came immediately after I had exhausted myself, with the full support of the President, trying to find a solution over there. I guess I got

personally involved in the whole matter. So I think Bob was out to cut him up right from the start, and I don't think he cared much whether he was fair to the man or not. And as such I don't think he cared much really. I suppose it's a terrible thing to say about a dead man, but I don't think he cared really much about how effectively this guy was doing his job as president of the United States, which we all should care a lot about. I'm sitting here hoping every day that Nixon turns out to be a genius, because sometimes even one as political as I am rises above politics. I don't think Bob did that, and I think it was a vendetta from the beginning.

Now I think it wasn't all a one-way street. I think some terrible mistakes were made on Lyndon Johnson's part. I know that in my own case, Pat [Patrick J.] Lucey was very close to the Kennedys. And John Reynolds, governor at the time, of Wisconsin. With my urging--quietly, they were very good friends--in January of 1964 in a state where Lyndon Johnson was really anathema because [William] Proxmire and [Gaylord] Nelson had spent their careers running against Lyndon Johnson and his oil buddies in Wisconsin. But John and Pat announced that Pat was starting a Committee for Johnson for President in Wisconsin. Now here's a solid Kennedy guy, very close Kennedy person, who had swallowed it and was heading up a committee in Wisconsin. And I'd gotten word of the possibility that this was not to the liking of the White House staff so I talked to Marv Watson, I talked to Cliff Carter whom I thought was very sympathetic to my point of view--Marv I didn't think was sympathetic at all--but at any rate by the end of the month the White House announced that Pat Lucey was *not* heading up a Johnson for President Committee, which I thought was gross stupidity.

M: A meaningless insult.

G: Well, and I heard that this happened in Iowa, although I don't know it for a fact. But what I am saying is that here was an opportunity to bring Pat Lucey into the fold; well, he lost him forever, of course. And when I was asked last January or February to get in touch with my friend Pat Lucey, who seemed to be going for McCarthy, and try to bring him to Johnson--that was before Johnson dropped out--I didn't have the stomach to do it. Because I knew I couldn't do anything about it anyway. This guy had been kicked in the teeth about six times, and I felt that, "Why the hell should I try to talk him into doing something I know he won't do, and I suppose if I were in his position I wouldn't do either?" What I'm saying in effect is that a lot of Kennedy people were kicked in the teeth by Johnson's people, and this violates the first rule of good politics.

M: This goes back to your nonpolitical assessment.

G: It violates the first rule of good politics, which is that when you beat a guy down then bring him into your fold. So as I say I don't think it was all a one-way street. I think, and it's hard to tell, Marv Watson was the chief villain of the piece in this, although I'm not sure. I'm not sure how much it was cleared with the President. These things I don't know, but Marv was the instrument of what I think was a wrong-headed approach to the Kennedy people.

So the development of some bitterness was inevitable, I suppose, but neither side seemed to make any real effort to mollify it or reduce it. And I think Johnson being president of the United States was the one that should have done a hell of a lot that he didn't do, and the Wisconsin case is a case in point.

Well, I guess that ends that point.

I got a call while I was out on some kind of speaking--what was it, the congressional races in 1965?

M: There might have been some somewhere; it wouldn't be a congressional year.

G: No. Well, I was on a speaking trip. I was going out for Arnold Olsen out in Montana, and I was out in San Francisco--a combined postal-political speaking tour, which was the typical case. I always did my political speeches in the evening in the off-hours, doing my avocation. But at any rate I got word that the President wanted to see me, and this was in August sometime. I remember I met my wife in Minneapolis for a Hubert Humphrey birthday party on a Saturday night before the Monday that I ultimately had the appointment with the President. But at any rate I went over on Monday about noon for this appointment.

And the funny thing is we were sitting at this table in Minneapolis--my wife and Ira Kapenstein. He was my chief of public information--information chief, press chief, or whatever you call it--PR. We called it information. But at any rate Ira was there. He had gone on the trip with me, I guess, and my wife came in from down here in Washington to pay homage to Hubert Humphrey. No, I guess Ira came in from Washington, and he brought the news. I hadn't heard that the President had wanted to see me on Monday.

One of us said, "I wonder what he wants to see you about." And my wife said, "He probably is going to appoint you ambassador of Poland." Now, why did she say that? There had been kidding over the last year that--in 1964 I had gone to Poland, at my request. I had made this suggestion to the President, that I would go in June of 1964 as the President's representative at a trade fair in Poland. I thought this was good politics, it was good international politics, too, to be the first Polish-American to be appointed to the

cabinet, representing the President in Poland. And the junket didn't bother me, either; I'd never been to the continent of Europe, so I thought it would be nice to go on government expense. Actually it wasn't at government expense because the Postmaster General travels free on the airlines. But anyway ever since that trip, every now and then somebody in my group had raised the question, "Wouldn't you want to be ambassador over there sometime?" Polish name, and all of this. But this hadn't gone on for some time, but that's what my wife said to me that night.

Well, I went over and waited about half an hour and then I went into the President's office, and the President took me into the little office where somebody was sculpting the bust, and he talked a bit about the bust. Then he went into, oh, a very warm personal conversation asking about the kids, my wife, and how I liked the way things were going, et cetera, et cetera. Then went on with a general discussion of foreign policy but with a line which said, "Twenty-five years from now people will little remember the price of the postage stamp during our administration, but they will remember whether we developed a framework for peace or war." And then he went on and asked how I'd like to go over as ambassador to Poland. This all took about half an hour. I was just listening.

M: The long, slow curve.

G: But done very adroitly, I tell you. By the time he finished talking, I was quite enthused about it--genuinely! He did make the point which was a correct point, and which was in retrospect clearly that he did me a very great favor by making this proposal. I'm not sure that's why he did it, but I'm sure that is how it ended up. But at any rate, I allowed as how I hadn't given much thought to it until right now, but it sounded like an interesting

assignment--"Sure!" If that's what he wanted me to do, why that's what I'd do and do it with pleasure.

And he said, "How do you think you wife will--?" Oh, he got Dean Rusk on the line and said, "John is coming over to talk to you, Dean, and so on. Let's get the thing moving." "How do you think Mary will react to this?" And I said, "Well, I gave you my reaction, I didn't give you Mary's. I'm not sure she'll like it." And he said, "Well, if Mary doesn't think it's a great idea, it's off. We'll just forget we ever had the conversation," which is part of the Johnson treatment.

Well, anyway, I went to see Dean and talked to him, then I went home and said, "Mary, sit down. You were right Saturday night."

M: She probably didn't remember what she'd predicted Saturday night.

G: Then I told her the whole conversation better than I can tell it now, and told her what the President had said. And of course once I told her that, it had the reaction on her, the effect on her, that the President surely knew it would have; that if the burden of this great service that her husband could do for America depends on her, she sure as hell wasn't going to stand in the way. At any rate she agreed, and I called him I guess that afternoon and told him that Mary allowed as how this wouldn't be so bad.

We had a breakfast cabinet meeting the next day and chatted a little bit more about it. Then we ultimately went down to the Ranch and he made a big announcement about it down at the Ranch over TV at one o'clock in the afternoon, I think it was, on August 29 or something like that.

M: I recall watching that one.

G: Larry O'Brien was down, and his appointment was announced. Larry and my wife and the kids were down on that one. And the wife and kids and Larry and his wife and boy--we all traveled down with Bill Moyers on the same JetStar. We were there overnight.

A little sidelight in history, I guess about as interesting as they come. [Arthur] Goldberg came the next morning. And I was chatting with him about eleven-thirty, and it went on I think at one o'clock. Just chatting with him--I guess he got there about eleven; I was chatting with him about noon, it was almost just before I went on. But at any rate Arthur asked me why I was there--and Dean Rusk was there, too, he was making a big production of it--and I said, "Oh, I'm going to go to Poland as ambassador." Oh, no! Arthur came up to me on August 29--we had a Stevenson stamp we were going to issue, and Arthur came up and talked to me about this Stevenson stamp. And he said, "Be sure and let me know because I want to represent the UN," he was the UN ambassador, "when you issue it." I said, "I'll drop a note to your secretary, and I'll leave a memo for Larry." He said, "Well, why Larry?" And I said, "Well, I'm going to Warsaw as ambassador, and Larry's going to be postmaster general." "Is that right?" He said, "I wondered what I came down here for."

M: And this was an hour before the big production went on.

G: He said, "I thought the President was going to change my jobs."

M: And the way the President did business sometimes, that might have been why he had been down there without any warning, too.

G: And that tells a little bit about the President's business.

But the big shock I got--I was walking out to the platform with Lady Bird, and I don't know how it came up, but I said something about being ambassador to Poland, and she said, "Oh, is that right?"

M: Even Lady Bird was not in on this one.

G: She had no idea what was going on.

M: I remember at the time this was seen by the press and everybody as a big coup of the Johnson Administration. He was going to send a Polish-American out to Poland, and so on and so on; first man we'd ever had who spoke Polish and so on. But then later it was publicized that you didn't in fact speak Polish. How did this misapprehension get started?

G: Well, because during the campaign of 1964 I spoke to a lot of Polish-American groups, naturally, and I learned enough Polish so that I could read paragraphs, and so on. I had a lot of canned paragraphs that I used, and I did it pretty well, worked like a dog on it.

M: If you could have just said, "Vote for Lyndon Johnson," to the Poles, that would have been all right.

G: And I had a lot of things like, for instance, I gave civil rights speeches and I quoted in Polish something from Kosciusko's will which was rather touching on the subject, and so on. So a lot of people thought I could, although I made it very clear that I couldn't. You know, I still can't speak it very well, although I learned some when I was over there. My kids learned it pretty well but I didn't.

But I think rationally the decision that Johnson made was more complicated than most people I suppose would expect it to be because it involved several things. It involved his desire to keep Larry O`Brien who apparently was leaving, his desire to have the man

from the Kennedy Administration who had the political reputation that Larry did in that role as a cabinet officer, harking back to the Farley-Roosevelt days. You know, Johnson is very much a Roosevelt man. And I think the idea intrigued him to have the Jim Farley of the Kennedy-Johnson day as postmaster general. I think he had a considerable affection for me, affection not being--I'm not speaking in--considerable appreciation of me rather, but he didn't particularly see any reason why I should hold down the cabinet spot. At the same time he thought that it would be a great idea to have Gronouski ambassador to Poland, and he probably conned himself into thinking that really this was the smartest thing in the world to do, to have me ambassador to Poland, and that "I really wasn't doing anything bad to John by taking him out of this cabinet job and putting him into a lower ranking ambassador job, I was doing something good for the country," Johnson was doing something good for the country, and it was fortunate that this solved his O'Brien problem. He could hang onto O'Brien, he needed him in the legislative program; O'Brien had indicated that he was going to leave. This way he could hold onto him, and everything worked out fine. I was dumped as postmaster general in favor of O'Brien. That's one aspect of it. At the same time I was taken out of a job into a job which he genuinely felt I could do very effectively.

M: And it was genuinely important.

G: And was very important. So those who said that--the Polish-Americans around the country were very upset, which are a very significant voting group in this country. Now, the Polish-Americans were very upset; I had two hundred leaders in and explained to them why I thought it was a wise decision of the President's, and why I thought it was good, and took them over to the White House. The President and Dean Rusk spoke to them, we gave them

the royal treatment. The President and Dean spoke to them at the White House in the Cabinet Room; Hubert Humphrey came and spoke to them--the Vice President--in my office. We had a big buffet for them and really did it up brown, because there was kind of a revolt against Johnson in a rather important group.

M: After all that treatment I expect the revolt came to a sudden halt, didn't it?

G: Well, it slowed it down. From one point of view it's clear that he wanted the slot I was in--the postmaster general; to me, anyway. Nobody has ever explained this to me, but he wanted my slot for Larry. At the same time, I don't think he felt he was doing anything but what was good for the country in taking me from that slot into what might very well be a more important position in Poland. What I'm saying is that these kinds of decisions are complex. The net effect is that he accomplished both things. He filled a post that needed filling badly. I should say that Kennedy's appointment to the post, John Cabot, was an extraordinarily fine gentleman from Boston, career civil servant, foreign service officer, extraordinarily fine fellow, but totally inept for the job in Poland. He might very well have been very good in a hundred other places, but my impression was a very bad appointment to Poland, because he was sort of the English gentleman kind of an ambassador. And it just didn't fit the Polish climate. So I could understand why he felt that I would be a good ambassador over there, and I think I was, as a matter of fact. So I think if you asked Johnson at the time why he was taking me out of the cabinet and putting me over there, his honest answer would have been not to make room for O'Brien, but because "I think Gronouski is the guy we need over there." And I think that would have been his honest answer. I don't think it would have been the right answer.

M: He could make himself believe it, though, because it was convenient.

G: Convenient and rational. I go into this at some length because I think it's important to get some insight into why presidents do what they do. I think I at least offer something on that. I think basically he felt in terms of his whole package it was for the good of the country and for the good of this administration. I think he was right; I think the whole package was an adroit, intelligent move.

M: There weren't any policy considerations in here? He didn't send you out with specific instructions that we were going to change something we'd previously been doing in regard to Poland, or in regard to Eastern Europe generally?

G: No, but he did ask me to serve in more than the capacity of an ambassador. He asked me to take a look at all of Eastern Europe, and give him directly--he said, "Send a copy to Dean Rusk, but report to me directly any proposals you have," and so on. And I did do this every so often when something quite important came up. But he also asked me to visit the other Eastern European countries and to report to him on what I thought ought to be policy for Eastern Europe per se, as against just Poland.

Now, I honored this partly, and partly I didn't. It's a very difficult thing to do. Certainly I made many recommendations to him and to the department that were broader than Poland as a result of this. I made visits to all of the countries and reported to him on my evaluation of the ambassadors. It got me in trouble in one case.

M: It's hard to get jurisdictional lines straight, I am sure, when you do that.

G: I did it very carefully, and I've never talked about this to anybody. Although the President himself in his announcement let the cat out of the bag and made it a little difficult for me

with my colleagues, who were my equals of course in these other places. So I felt that I had a little more of an assignment than simply ambassador, and yet it was a very ill-defined thing; he announced it as being that I would be his ambassador in Eastern Europe.

M: And then later he wondered how that leak got out, and sure enough he would be the sinner.

G: It's in his printed advance text.

M: I can see how it might give you a little difficulty.

G: Well, I went to visit Hungary, and after we talked a while, [the Ambassador] said, "Well, now, I don't want you to think we always do things this way," or something like that. I can't remember just what he said. At any rate he said, "I know what you're doing here." And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" He said, "I know you're supposed to report back on what's going on." I said, "Oh, nonsense, I'm just coming here to learn a little bit about Eastern Europe; you guys can teach me things." "Don't kid me." I got a little of this, you know, and it all came from his statement.

M: We're running off this first tape here. I've got quite a number of questions, particularly on--

G: Are we out of it?

M: Not quite.

G: Talking about leaks. At one point I needed a post office badly in Dallas, and he held up the Dallas thing. Finally I saw him, I don't know whether I went over directly on this or not, but I talked to him on the post office in Dallas on the phone or personally. And finally he said, "Okay, go ahead." Then the question was, how the hell--how do I announce it? A lot of people wanted to announce this, this was a very big thing. They had needed it for years. So I didn't tell anybody about it, I was holding it over the weekend, and all of a sudden I

get a call from Texas that it's the headline in the papers down in Texas, in Dallas, "New Post Office Authorized." God Almighty, Kermit Gordon called me--he was with the Bureau of the Budget at the time--and Kermit said, "John, I just was talking to the President, and he said, 'Find out from Gronouski, for Christ's sake, how that post office thing leaked.'" So I said, "Okay, I'll try; it didn't leak from me, but who knows?" So I ran into Joe Poole going to lunch--Joe Poole was the guy that was the author of the story--and I said, "Joe, where did you get that story?" He said, "Well, you know, I was in the President's office Friday afternoon, and the President said to me, "We're going to build a post office down in Dallas." So I called back to Kermit and told him what happened, and Kermit said, "The Ship of State is the strangest ship of all; it leaks from the top."

M: Now we are out of tape.

[End of tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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JOHN GRONOUSKI

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