INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT HARDESTY

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

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F: Bob, tell us a little bit about who Mr. Hardesty is—where he came from and how you got to here.

H: Well, I was born in St. Louis in 1931. I went to Washington originally to go to school at George Washington University in 1951. It was almost night school with time out for the Army. I spent almost ten years at George Washington in English literature and working on my master's.

F: Why did you pick George Washington?

H: I ended up in Washington. That's where I was. We were sort of bumming around the country, my brother and I, and so we stopped there. I had been out at the University of Colorado for a year and wanted to go back to school, so that's where I ended up. I was in the Army from '53 to '55. I acquired a wife and a couple of children along the way so I just stayed in night school on the GI Bill, did some newspaper work around Washington, particularly with the Army Times for two or three years covering the Hill and the Pentagon and did some public relations and advertising work. Then, in 1963, John Gronouski, who had just become Postmaster General, asked me to come over and write speeches for him, and I didn't know whether I really wanted to work for the government at the time we were talking about it. Then the assassination occurred and the discussion was sort of put on the back-burner for awhile.

F: You hadn't gone to work for Gronouski then?

H: No, not then. The assassination took place, and all the speeches by Cabinet officers were cancelled. There wasn't any urgency on it. And he said, "We'll talk about it after the first of the year." And then President Johnson gave his first State of the Union address and it was just one of those things.

I suppose everyone has a President he considers his own personal President during his own lifetime. When I heard that speech, I realized I wanted to go to work for him, and so I went over and told John Gronouski that I'd like to work over there. And so we started in on the '64 campaign very early.

F: You didn't know President Johnson at this time?

H: No. I had never met him. John Gronouski's principal role in the campaign, I guess, was to handle the minorities and a self-assigned role was to take care of the widely publicized "backlash" against the civil rights movement. So from March of '64 on, we were on the road, talking all over the country--particularly to minority groups--Polish-Americans, Italian-Americans, and I was writing his speeches. And I stayed there all during the campaign and after the campaign I was sort of itching to leave, and Gronouski said, "No, this is going to be very interesting because one of my assignments is going to be to go out and campaign for the freshman Congressmen whom we elected in the '64 campaign, and you'll enjoy it so stay on." So I was there until the summer of 1965 and then got a call from Horace Busby in the White House asking me to come over. That must have been in August of '65. I went over and talked to him. I didn't know this at the time, but Busby was about ready to leave and so was Dick Goodwin and they were short of writers over in the White House. He said that he had called the Democratic National Committee and asked for the fifty best campaign speeches that had been written in the last year or two for Cabinet officers and he said forty of them were mine and he wanted me to come over there.

F: You were kind of dominating the market.

H: Well, it was rather a frustrating experience afterwards though because I assumed I was coming over to be a political speech writer and I think that

was the idea, and it turned out that President Johnson wasn't that much of a political President. Which I don't think he was. In the height of a campaign, he might go out and rap the Republicans a little bit, but basically he wasn't that partisan a man. But anyway I went over there with my secretary and the day after I arrived we got ensconced in the Executive Office Building and Will Sparks showed up, who was Bob McNamara's speech writer, and they pulled him over for the same reason--ostensibly each of us for a month. "Bring your typewriter, your files, and your secretaries--come on over for a month." After three months my secretary said, "Well, I don't know about you, but I'm a career employee, and I'm going back to the Post Office Department." And I stayed on. Will and I were doing just about all the writing over there for a period of four or five months till Bob Kintner came along and started expanding the staff while we were there.

F: How did the President work his speeches through you? Did he give you definite assignments on definite topics, or did this filter down through someone in the staff?

H: Jack Valenti was basically the chief editor. And while we would see the President from time to time, very seldom we'd talk about a specific speech unless he just happened to be thinking about it in the course of the conversation. Jack would get an assignment that was coming up and he would call Will or me and say, "Let's get going on a speech on this." During this early period, of course--this was toward the end of the first session of the Eighty-Ninth Congress--we had sometimes two and three bill signings a day. So we were up to four or five in the morning every night just turning out bill signing statements, and the President always wanted to make a production out of them--in the Rose Garden, the East Room, and that's what we were doing most of the time--getting the bills signed.

F: Did you divide the duties between you in the sense of your taking one type speech and Will's part taking another, or did you work on the same speeches together?

H: No, we'd just take them as they came, and then it got to be so bad after awhile that we'd be doing our own speeches during the day and into the evening, and another one would be piled on top of us. We would both be just sucking air by that time, so finally maybe at midnight neither of us could write a speech alone and we would get a secretary in there and dictate the third speech just to get it out by the deadline in the morning.

F: You were beyond the point where the fingers would move.

H: Well, you couldn't think that fast and sometimes if Will came out with an idea and a sentence, I could finish it with a following idea and we would sort of bolster each other up like that. That went on for quite awhile.

F: Did you attend these bill signing ceremonies also?

H: Oh, yes. The President said, "I want you to get over there." For a half hour--that was a good break and it gave you a good chance to catch his own meter and the way he liked to talk. I always felt that the best speech you could write for him was something that would interest him enough to turn him on and, if he started ad-libbing which he was best at, then I felt that that speech was successful. If he just raced through it, then I thought it was a rather pedestrian speech that didn't interest him too much.

F: You would agree that really he is at his best when he is speaking off the cuff?

H: Yes. And all of us, of course, tried to convince him of that. And he would do it in small groups around the White House, but when he got a

camera on him, he just didn't feel like he could do it unless he just took off in the middle of a speech. I remember one classic story, and this must have been in the spring of 1966, the President called us and said he wanted a speech to swear in Robert LaFollette Bennett as Commissioner of Indian Affairs. He said, "Now, I really want a great speech on this. It has just been a tragedy what we've done to the Indians and we haven't done anything for them. Given them a lot of lip service." And he said, "We've got a good man here--one of the best men in the country and we've got Indian leaders from all over the country coming to the East Room for this ceremony, and I want a program." And old Charlie Schultz, the Budget Director, used to accuse the speech writers anyway of spending half his budget. He said, "You guys have spent a hundred million dollars just getting a news lead for a speech." I said, "Well, that's just what the man wants, Charlie." And he used to kid us about it. So the President said, "Get Cabinet people on the phone and talk to different people and get some ideas on housing and health, education for Indians, and see what we can do to get a good speech." So we talked around and finally got a draft in to him, and he sent it back and said, "This is all right, but it is not enough. Get some more." So we worked on it some more and sent it in, and he okayed it. And he got up there in the East Room that morning, just filled with Indian leaders from all over the country, and half the government officials were there and standing around. And he starts on this speech. And he has gone about ten minutes and the Indians are standing up, cheering, and whistling, and this turns him on. So he leaves the speech in the middle of a sentence and doesn't come back to it for four or five minutes--and just as a corollary to that, when he did come back, he came right back to the next word in the sentence and just picked it up. All this time he's talking

about what he's going to do for the Indians. And he's adding things on to what we're doing.

F: You mean he makes it up as he goes.

H: First he tells Bennett, "You get a Civil Service Board over there, and we're going to clean out the cobwebs and get something going and we're going to build houses, and we're going to build new schools, and hospitals and try to get the Indians off the reservations, try to get jobs for them if they want them. If not, we are going to clean up the reservations," and he's getting very specific. And finally Jim Duesenberry, a member of the Council of Economic Advisors, turned to me and said, "Holy God, somebody run get Charlie Schultz--he's giving the country back to the Indians."

F: Did you get the feeling from watching him in action, not just this time but other times that he did have a strong sense of idealism or that it was just a good and intelligent kind of political cynicism?

H: I think a very, very strong sense of idealism and it came through.

F: He wasn't necessarily counting votes then when he took off on these flights on what he was going to do?

H: No. I don't think so at all. As a matter of fact, going through the papers down here in Texas, I ran across an off-the-record statement that he made to the governors just two or three days after the assassination--they were in town for the Kennedy funeral, and I don't know why they never put the statement out, it was just beautiful; he was obviously ad-libbing it and he was talking about what conditions would produce an Oswald or a Ruby, and this was the pure Lyndon Johnson before the country ever got to know him, he was talking about the degradation and the poverty and the ignorance and disease and the kind of environment that would produce people like this, and this was Lyndon Johnson showing through, the first

couple of days he was in office.

F: To bring your career on up to the present, how did your job develop? I want to go back and get some specifics later. But Kintner came in. Did that relieve your situation somewhat?

H: Well, it did to some degree. Of course, I'm very fond of Bob, but Jack Valenti was such a masterful editor that even if you turned in a mundane draft, particularly on a shorter statement, Jack was just such a great editor, he could add a sentence or two and heighten it, and make a good speech out of a mundane speech.

F: He had kind of a strong sense of the dramatic.

H: Oh, he did and a great sense of the language. So even though we were working awfully hard and awfully late, it was very rewarding and nobody complained. Then Jack left and Bob Kintner came, and Bob started building up the staff of writers and took a lot of the pressure off. I remember the day that Kintner arrived, and I guess Jack was still on the scene for a couple of days. The President called and said he wanted Will Sparks and me to meet Kintner, and we went into the Oval Office and Jack was there and we sat down. And the President, with his unusual sense of hyperbole, said to Kintner, "Now, Bob, I want you to meet two of the best speech writers a President ever had." Now, this was, you know, a little more than even we were used to. And then he defined what he considered the best speech writers a President ever had. They are not temperamental, they don't miss deadlines, they don't get drunk the night before a major speech." So then we worked with Bob for the next--oh, I worked with him for, I guess, a year.

And then late in '66 or early '67 Larry O'Brien came to me and said that he and the President had been talking a long time about setting up

some sort of a government-wide organization to be spearheaded at the White House to keep Democratic members of Congress informed, to keep them supplied with political ammunition and generally to support the programs of the Administration and asked me if I would take in on. He said that he had talked to the President, and we had a carte blanche to do what we wanted. And he called in the Cabinet Room--I guess he called in the Under-Secretaries--and told them to assign one of their best writers in each department and agency to do this full-time, and so then we had an operation going.

F: Who spearheaded the operation?

H: Well, I was handling it in the White House, and I got a couple of writers to come in full-time with me, and then we had one man in each department and agency plus the back-up they needed. Basically, the idea was just to out-talk the Republicans to get our bills passed, to out-argue them; any favorable editorials on the Administration we would just write a little introduction and have it put in the Congressional Record by a friend in the Congress, as a matter of course.

F: How did you disseminate this information gathering?

H: It varied. Mike Manatos handled the Senate mostly. If we got in a real bind I would call on the other members of the Congressional relations staff and ask them if they could do it. If it were purely a departmental affair, if we had a special message going up on civil rights, for example, we would get the Justice Department to get their Congressional people to--.

F: Did you put this out on a daily basis?

H: We were just going all the time on it.

F: Just as fast as things were available, you would shovel them up to Congress?

H: Sometimes we would have ninety to a hundred items in the Congressional Record for

one day--on a big bill, particularly. And it paid off very well in two areas: one, when the Republicans tried to scuttle the poverty program and split the programs off--that was in 1967. We were working hand-in-glove with Shriver and his people and we just fed more material to Democrats; and the idea was not only to get them to make statements on the floor and to keep the record full, but to have the statements of such quality and news-value that they'd hit the wires and dominate the news.

F: Well, for instance, for something like the poverty fight then, you would get some Congressman who was involved in it directly and feed him the sort of statistics, or other information, whereby he could then make a statement. You were his writer?

H: We'd write the statement if he wanted it.

F: He delivered it and then it would make its way into the Record.

H: That's right.

F: Did you work on liberal Republicans, or not necessarily liberal Republicans, although usually they would be, but the sort of Republican who in a specific instance might be leaning in your direction?

H: We didn't from the White House because we didn't feel we wanted to ask any favors of them. Now, in the departments, they had their own people--the Department of State worked very closely with Republicans, as well as Democrats, and if it were a bill that some of the Republicans would support, they didn't feel any compunctions about asking them to do it, but we just didn't feel that we could ask them.

F: They would have a direct entree to Republicans on the Foreign Relations Committee.

H: That's right. The other main point where I think it really paid off was the education bill, where they tried to kill the Teacher Corps and we just

snowed them on that.

F: Do you think that these statements by Congressmen are effective?

H: Oh, it depends.

F: What are you trying to do in this--are you trying to educate opposition Congressmen through utilizing those who go with you on a program, or are you trying to build up backfires back in home constituencies?

H: Both. If it works best, you are dominating the news is what you are doing. I was never as convinced it was all that necessary. You know, President Johnson was very sensitive to news and he had the tickers going in his office and if he saw a potential fire building up, he would want to get somebody on the floor of the Senate or the House to put it out immediately. And he read the Record every morning--it was the first thing he saw before he saw the papers. He had a marked copy of the Record. It's what he wanted and it's what he was used to. And that's the way he operated when he was Majority Leader. It worked better then because he was there handing out statements.

F: Who marked the record for him?

H: Well, Sherwin Markman mostly, and then when Sherwin left, Bill Blackburn.

F: He marked those entries into the record that he thought would be of direct interest to the President--the other speeches and so forth were just so much filler?

H: That's right. If it was complimentary to him, or to one of his programs, he would want to see that so he could write him a nice letter; and if it was derogatory he wanted to see that so that we could write fifteen speeches in rebuttal.

F: During this period of the great sort of crush on the Congressional Record, did the President take a direct hand in that or did you more or less just

have a blanket assignment and he took for granted that you were going to do it?

H: He took for granted that we'd do it, but that doesn't mean he wouldn't be on the phone two or three times a day saying, "Get this done," or, "that done."

F: Getting back to speech writing, did he take much of a hand in editing himself, or did he pretty much take what was handed him by the time it had gone through the mill?

H: It would vary between a major speech and a minor speech. He was an excellent editor and knew just what to do with a speech when he took a hand in it. The problem with speech writing around there was that he would keep changing them and changing them up to the last minute and I don't know that anybody did it deliberately, but your tendency was to not turn them in until the last minute so that you could preserve what you thought ought to be preserved. But, basically, he spent much more time on the major speeches. We would sit around the Cabinet with him and he would have advisers in, Cabinet members and outside people.

F: Did he try out these speeches on other people sometimes first for certain passages?

H: Sometimes he would. I remember we were down at the ranch one time and sitting around the dining room table, and a couple of his friends from Texas, I don't remember who they were, were around there and I had written a speech for him to talk to the conference, "To Fulfill These Rights," the Civil Rights Conference, and one section in there was the first announcement he was going to have on the reform of federal juries, a section in there saying that we can't tolerate any longer Negroes being tried by all-white juries, and the language was a little stronger than that. And he read it

and the friend of his who was a lawyer--had been on the bench, I guess--it wasn't Judge Moursund, I can't remember who it was, but he objected a little bit to it and said, "Well, I was on the bench for twenty-five years and I never had an all-white jury in any Negro case I ever tried." And the President thought about that for awhile and he said, "Well, you know, you remember old so-and-so we used to go to school with down there?" And his friend said, "Yes." "Well," he said, "I remember one night he went to a dance over in Fredericksburg, got a few too many beers in him, and announced that he could beat any Dutch S.O.B. in the house. And at this point a great, big, strapping farmer," and of course the President gestured to show the size of his forearms and biceps, came up and said, "Vot you say?" (He said that with a Dutch accent.) And he said, "I can beat any Dutch S.O.B. in the house. Are you a Dutch S.O.B.?" And he said, "You better not be think so!" And he said, "Well, then I wasn't talking about you." So the President said, "I wasn't talking about you then."

F: I see. These anecdotes were not, in a sense, contrived. He had a sort of retention and an easy ability to pull them out.

H: Oh, yes. And the more relaxed he was, the more often he would use them.

F: Did you work on the Civil Rights Bill--the one in '67-'68? Open housing?

H: Yes, we worked on them through the Congressional end. And worked on the messages. You know, everybody would get his hands in the messages.

F: Yes. How do you avoid, in this matter of multiple writers on a major speech--I presume your speech sort of came in takes. And how did you avoid getting your takes out of order? In other words, how did you make your transition and keep the thing going smoothly?

H: Well, it all depends on whether you got it back or not. Sometimes you would write a draft and would never see it again. Somebody else would

get hold of it and sometimes would heighten it and sometimes would ruin it, depending on the point of view; but sometimes you just never saw them again. And other times you would be getting them back and redo them according to directions. There was never any--you could never count on any one system working from one day to the next.

F: There was no real pattern?

H: No.

F: When the President took a hand in editing, was it usually to tone down or tone up?

H: I was never able to get to the left of that man in the three-and-a-half years I was there, as far as writing a speech is concerned. I'd call around the government to get some ideas of what to put in a speech, talk to Cabinet officers, sub-Cabinet officers, different people, get ideas, and sometimes I would just be afraid to send them in--the ideas would sound so radical. And never once did I have anything bounce back from him saying, "This is too much." Sometimes he would call and say, "This is a good idea. Let's get some more on it." I was never able to get to the left of him.

F: Did you have any difficulty at all with the receptivity of your Cabinet people when you would call, or is the power of the Presidency sufficient that when you called from the White House, to talk about a problem or incipient problems--?

H: It varied. It varied on whether they were in sympathy with what you were doing; that was one thing. It varied in the subject matter. You found quite often that Cabinet officers and their speech writers and Public Information Officers--not all of them but a good many of them--didn't like to give the White House new ideas because they were saving them for themselves. You ran into that. So sometimes you would have to be a

reporter--just start calling around until somebody would give you a nugget of something and then you would call and say, "Why didn't you tell me about this?" So you ran into that. Often too you would ask for a draft and they would know that it would get completely rewritten and so they just wouldn't take the care. And they also discovered, after a while--the departments--that if they sent an idea over, sometimes it wasn't used and it was never sent back and so, often, it was lost. So all these things added up to the fact that unless you had--you just had to develop your own network because you couldn't count on that much help through routine chanels.

F: Were there certain people within the Cabinet who were consistently less cooperative than others, or did it vary from issue to issue?

H: It varied. I can't think of anybody who was consistently uncooperative--Oh, I can thing of some people down, you know, some Schedule C appointees, but with Cabinet officers, it just varied on the occasion.

F: By the time you came along, was there still a sort of Kennedy faction within the President's staff?

H: In the staff itself?

F: Yes.

H: Not too much. Goodwin was leaving. There weren't many Kennedy people left on the staff. Just trying to think--Cater was there, Busby was there, Moyers was there, Valenti was there, Califano was there. Califano had been in the Administration with Bob McNamara under Kennedy, but we would never consider him a Kennedy man. No, I think most of the Kennedy people had gone.

F: Did you ever work on press releases, or was that handled entirely by the press office?

H: If they were shorthanded and you were caught in the halls on a Saturday morning, or something, and they said, "Do you have anything to do?" "No."

"Would you write a press release?" It wasn't a general form of your assignment, but you are always happy to do it.

F: Did the President have a well developed sense of the type of thing that would make a good newspaper headline and lead? Or did you just have to throw it out and hope for the best?

H: No, he had an uncanny sense of what would make a news lead and he—if he had time to think about it, he'd talk to you about it in the speech draft and suggest doing it. If he didn't have time and he felt while he was in the middle of the speech that there was no news lead, he would come up with one. Just by his ad-libbing. And he did it invariably.

F: For instance?

H: Oh, I remember one time I wrote a signing statement for him on a community water and sewer--rural community water and sewer--bill. It was a bill that had been introduced and pushed through by Senator George Aiken. It was a very good bill, just tripled and quadrupled the federal expenditures in this area. And it was a needed bill and I had written this statement; I guess looking back it was rather mundane--it explained what the bill was doing and tried to impart a sense of excitement about what all the bill was going to do, but there was no news lead in it. And he sensed it and so, right in the middle of the speech, he said, "Now, I want all you people on the other side of the aisle over here this morning to note that I am signing with a great deal of pleasure a bill that was introduced by a member of your own party." And he said, "Now, I just want you to know that that is going to be my policy--." So he, I don't remember exactly how he said it, but he implied that "I don't expect much out of your side of the aisle in the way of constructive legislation, but you can be sure that if you will come up with it, I'll sign it." And he got a big laugh and a

nice little headline out of it. Just unerring.

F: Going back to '64 before you joined him, but in a sense you were working with him with Gronouski, in the pre-campaign campaign and then the campaigning, how substantial was the backlash in your opinion? Was it a fear or was it real?

H: I don't know how you ever read something like that. How do you know whether you were effective in turning it back, or whether it was really there in the first place? It seemed to be there in the primaries in Wisconsin and Indiana and Maryland when [George] Wallace did surprisingly well in all three primaries. Now, is it the question of whether the people are willing to throw away their vote in a primary on protest and not in the general election--I don't know.

F: There's no sure way to read it.

H: It may be that it was just beginning to build up in 1964 and in '68 we really saw the full effects of it. I think certainly, under any circumstances, it was stronger in '68. I think that the middle class white community felt that we had pretty well deserted them.

F: Did you get the idea that this feeling was stronger in so-called minority groups that had made the transition successfully than in the kind of older, perhaps Anglo-Saxon types?

H: Well, you are talking about a physical problem. These are the people who are living adjacent to the ghetto community and when the ghetto walls come down, their communities are threatened first.

F: Yes.

H: So it's just a matter of practicality with them. They are the first people who are going to get it. I don't know. I don't know how you rationalize this sort of thing. Obviously, if you have a moral problem

you have to do something about it, and yet you can understand their anxieties on it.

F: What was Mr. Gronouski's approach to it? Besides forty best speeches?

H: He just went out and told them that--well, he backed into it the first couple of times; he went out to Milwaukee and Clem Zablocki saw his speech and said, "You are going to get yourself killed." And it was rather mild then, but he was just--He hit it head on and just said that, "There is prejudice here and there is no point in covering it up and just say you like George Wallace because you think he would make a good president. This is pure prejudice, pure and simple. It has never been the tradition of the Polish people, you've known prejudice and bigotry. You've known what it's like to be ridiculed because of the size of your nose or how you spell your name." And they accepted it. And they accepted it quite well. And then he just started building up on it.

F: Did you get the feeling, and I know this is highly subjective, that it worked better because the man making the speech was named Gronouski than if he had been named Hardesty?

H: Oh, sure, because if I had said it, they would have been insulted. But he could get up there and say, "You know, I know what it's like. I know. I was teased all my life because of my name." And he would shame them. He'd say, "Is it right, the things that you've detested all your life and you didn't want your children to go through, to subject on to somebody else?" And he got away with it.

F: Did you get the feeling from working closely with Gronouski that he had made the transition from Kennedy to Johnson quite successfully?

H: Oh, yes, very. He was a great, and still is, a great Johnson supporter. One of the differences, of course, he loved Jack Kennedy, he never got

along well with Bob Kennedy. Bob Kennedy blocked his appointment--as I understand the story, he was supposed to have been Kennedy's first Internal Revenue Commissioner. And Bob Kennedy blocked that. And then when Jack Kennedy decided to appoint him Postmaster General, he did it without telling Bobby anything about it until he had announced it. And I think Bobby went through the roof when he heard about it. So there wasn't any question of making the transition.

F: Was it personal antipathy?

H: Yes, I guess Bob Kennedy just didn't like him. So there was never any love lost. John went up to New York in '64 to campaign for Bobby Kennedy. He did it out of loyalty to President Kennedy. He spent two or three solid days up there from morning to midnight going through all the Polish-American communities they could hit, and when it was all over, Bobby never even said, "Thank you."

F: Did you get the impression that Gronouski was eased out of the Postmastership as an Ambassador, or did you think that this was looked upon as a vital need that he happened to have particular abilities to fill?

H: I don't know how you ever really know what all the reasons were. Obviously, President Johnson wanted to do something for Larry O'Brien. At first I felt a little bitterness about it, but then we were down at the ranch and the President was talking about it. He said, "We're having a reception for John and Mary Gronouski when we get back to Washington, before they leave for Poland, and I want you and your wife to come." Then he started talking about it, and he said, "It's an awful lot to ask a man to step down from the prestige of the Cabinet and take an Ambassadorship, but I told him that you can sit over there and worry about the price of postage stamps for the next four years if you want to; but the most important thing I've got on my mind is to try to get some peace in the

world, and I need you over there in Poland to help me." And then he turned around to me and said, "I don't know whether it will work or not, but, God, we've got to try." And there was, as far as I was concerned, sincerity in that statement. And when John got to Poland, he was glad it happened. He loved the post and felt it was much more challenging and exciting than what he had been doing.

F: He had no previous personal experience in Poland?

H: He'd been over there once while he was Postmaster General to the Poznan Fair. That's all.

F: So that this was just a new country and a new life for him.

H: That's right.

F: You think, then, he went fairly willingly in the line of duty.

H: Oh, he went willingly in the line of duty. He was a little disappointed, I think, when he went, but every time I talked to him after that, when he came back on leave, and when he finally came back, he said he wouldn't have had it any other way. He was doing exciting things, he was involved in the China talks. Then, it was a new area.

F: Did you work on any of the Viet Nam speeches?

H: Oh, you would work on Viet Nam speeches at one stage or another--drafts.

F: Did the President give you alternatives in this? In other words, would you write two speeches, one taking one line, one taking another, for him to choose?

H: Not particularly. Of course, Harry McPherson was doing a good deal of the major Viet Nam speech writing, Walt Rostow contributing. We'd get involved in Viet Nam speeches more if it were on another occasion and then he would say he wanted to put something in about Viet Nam and tell you what he wanted. If it was a major speech, specifically on Viet Nam and

only on Viet Nam, I would very seldom get involved in it. And then, of course, you are on a plane and he would say, "I want to say this," and, "say that," and then you would fit that into the speech.

F: Was he a great hand just to take for granted everyone in his employ was sufficiently expert to handle any problems he threw his way?

H: He assumed so.

F: So that there never were any lines that were outside your expertise.

H: No, and he resisted any attempt to organize a staff along any lines. I remember early when I was over there, he asked Joe Califano--Joe came over about the same time--he said, "Get your chart man over in the Pentagon and draw me up a table of organization. Get this staff organized." So Joe spent about a week, up every night, getting the whole thing and had these beautiful charts the Department of Defense people made up, and he went in to brief the President and the President sat there with those hooded eyes of his, listening, and finally when he finished, the President said, "Well, Joe, you think that's what we ought to do?" And he said, "Yes, sir, I do, Mr. President, very strongly." And he said, "Well, we're not going to do it." And that was the end of that. The end of the organization.

F: Well, what do you think occasioned that?

H: I don't know. He just had an idea one time that we ought to organize it and he thought better of it, but he forgot to call Joe off of it, I suppose.

F: Right. Did you have any sort of jealousies among the various members of the staff over who worked on what?

H: Oh, there are always jealousies going on.

F: Well, I mean anything more than just ordinary.

H: Those are pretty shark-infested waters over there.

F: You've got some strong-willed people or they wouldn't be there.

H: Yes, you find a knife in your back here and there. You just have to protect yourself from it.

F: What form did they take--the knives in the back?

H: Oh, sometimes you wouldn't hear about it for three months, but usually something would get back to you that somebody was dropping a little line here and there. Or sometimes you would send a draft of a speech in, and it would never get to the President.

E: A sort of disinclination for you to get credit for something?

H: That's right.

F: Any particular sinners along that line?

H: I don't know that it's important to get involved in them. I found Bill Moyers was particularly bad, or good, depending on how you want to talk about it, while he was there. The difficulty with being a general staff man is that you can work hard all day long and there's nothing at the end of the day that shows what you've done; and so speeches become a prime target for this sort of thing because a man can point to a speech that he has done. So you are just in an area that lends itself to this sort of in-fighting.

F: Were you expected to do your sort of homework for speeches between jobs? In other words, I would think in your position you should have been alert to some of the current literature and some of the current criticism in order to meet them--and some of the current suggestions.

H: Reading all the time and I guess when you are in the White--.

F: Reading on the job was no sin?

H: Oh, no. I guess while you are in the White House even your subconscious

is never really inactive. I can remember many times waking up in the middle of the night and realizing that I had been editing a speech in my sleep. And so your mind is on it all the time. You might not even have a specific assignment, but you know what the problems are and what the public relation requirements are at the moment. You are always thinking about it.

F: You undoubtedly have put through quite a number of speeches which were basically yours but were unrecognizable when they came out.

H: Oh, sure. And an awful lot of them that never got used for a variety of reasons--cancelled trip, a change of direction in what he wanted to say. The undelivered speeches of Lyndon Johnson would make a mighty thick volume.

F: I see. Another archives. What have you been doing since you came down here?

H: Oh, just pouring through the papers mostly, doing some interviewing with the President. Just getting ready to start the first book.

F: Are you starting back with--In other words, where are you starting? I'll ask it directly.

H: The first book, as we have it planned now, will be a book on the highlights of the Presidency. And the first chapter, as a working title, will be called "Asumming the Reigns of Government." That's what I'm working on right now.

F: This is not so much autobiographical then, that he is doing. This is an analysis of the Johnson years in the White House.

H: That's right. Well, not even a complete analysis. Highlights--probably eight or ten chapters. The first one will be Dallas and the period of transition and maybe going on through breaking the legislative log jam

with the tax bill and the Civil Rights Bill. The next one will probably be the three early Latin American crises: the Dominican Republic and Panama and Guantanamo Base. And then the '64 campaign, obviously, will have to be treated in a chapter. Early Viet Nam decisions, Gulf of Tonkin, the '65 buildup. Black revolution will have to be handled somewhere in there. The search for peace. These are, generally, the type of things. But it won't be a continuous thread of a dialogue or a monologue going throughout the Presidency. It will just be certain areas, important areas.

F: Did the President ever talk with you about the Black Revolution? Publicly, he has been rather quiet on it. I'm talking about the militants.

H: When I talk about the Black Revolution, I include in that the Civil Rights Bills, the whole area of civil rights and--He has never really--you know, a chance remark here and there. I think he's hurt that a lot of the militant leadership deserted him when he felt he was giving so much of himself and his Administration to their cause. Aside from that, not much. We'll get into it in the book, and we'll see what develops out of that.

F: All right. Good. Going back to Congressional relations, did you have a specific Congressman or specific group of Congressmen who were your special charge?

H: Yes. Barefoot [Sanders] along the line asked me if I would be willing to take on some Congressmen who would be assigned to me for the Congressional relations operation, and I certainly accepted, and looked forward to it. It was a little different job and a change of pace, and he gave me the New York delegation--Democrats--outside of the city, all the upstate Democrats, the Pennsylvania Democrats, and the Michigan Democrats. Now, this obviously wasn't a full-time thing basically because most of them were pretty loyal people anyway. What you had to do was keep in contact

with them and make sure they were abreast on the bills that were coming up and take their temperature now and then. But aside from the real fire-eating liberals who were deserting us on Viet Nam, it wasn't a group that you had to be in constant contact with. I found it very pleasant.

F: Domestically they were fairly dependable.

H: Oh, yes.

F: Could you contact them by telephone, or did you have to go see them in person?

H: It varied, you know, if you had to do a head count you just didn't have time to go see them personally and you would contact them on the phone. And then you would set aside a certain amount of the time each day and each week to go up on the Hill and just roam around and chat with them.

F: Well, now, on something like the open housing, that was at one time highly debatable and you weren't sure you were going to make it. Did you do hard counts on them?

H: Oh, yes.

F: How did you do it--by telephone?

H: Both. Depends on whether--you know--Before we were really ready for the floor fight you would just go up and talk to people and see what their sense of it was. You didn't need a firm head count then. But when it got to the floor, then you'd really have to go talk to them.

F: Now, on any piece of controversial legislation, did you hit them twice or three times, once in the subcommittee, once in committee, and once on the floor?

H: Sure. We found that the whip count operated on the Hill was very unreliable and not very effective.

F: Why is that?

H: I don't know. I wasn't around before to know whether it ever was particularly effective.

F: You don't know what the alternative is?

H: No, I don't know whether it ever really was effective or whether the fact that Lyndon Johnson had taken over so completely that they just felt it wasn't worth worrying about. You know, if they knew the White House had an effective whip system, which we did, or head count system, then they figure "What's the point of bothering with it?" And as a result it broke down into a system where the local area whip's secretary or AA would call the other AA's, or secretaries, and find out how that Congressman is leaning on this. And it's just not effective.

F: This has to be second-hand at best, but did you get the feeling that there was more White House concern with head counting under Johnson than there had been under Kennedy who maybe had even more than Eisenhower? In other words, is this a Johnson peculiarity?

H: I just don't know. Larry O'Brien was awfully good. I doubt it. I think probably the President took more personal interest in it. But I don't think the staff system changed too much because, you know, Larry O'Brien, even when he was Postmaster General, was still heading the operating up until a year ago. So I don't--[it] may have been more intense, maybe the President demanded a little bit more, but the system was set up under Kennedy.

F: Did you ever hear the President express himself on the quality of leadership in the House and Senate during his years in the Presidency?

H: Yes, and it varied from time to time, depending on whether he was happy with them or unhappy with them, you know. But he never expected anything but the worst out of the Republicans.

F: Did he always seem to keep his lines open though with the Republican opposition leadership? In other words, were he and Gerald Ford able to talk?

H: Yes, they would. I think it was more so with Dirksen, but they kept their lines open.

F: Was the White House arm-twisting a newspaper term, or was it real?

H: Arm-twisting is--

F: What can you do to a Congressman who is recalcitrant, or, what can you do to keep them from being recalcitrant?

H: I had a long conversation with Barefoot a week or so before we left the White House about this whole area and he said that if he had it to do over again, he felt the biggest weakness in Lyndon Johnson's Congressional operation was the fact that there was no system for reward and punishment. There were plenty of rewards, but there was never, or very seldom, any punishment. And the members of Congress got to know that very fast. They knew that, despite the fact that he was supposed to be a mean, old S.O.B., that Lyndon Johnson just wouldn't follow through and cut out a guy's post office.

F: Would he threaten?

H: Oh, he might say it in the confines of his office, but I never knew him to say it to a guy directly.

F: He never really committed himself.

H: No. And when it came right down to it, we'd say--a member of Congress would call and say, "Gee, I'm not getting any help out of this thing because HUD is holding it up"--a grant, program, or something. Because HUD would know that he hadn't been cooperative, and he would come to the White House and we'd maybe try to stall it and it would get to the President and he would say, "Well, go ahead and give it to him." He's pretty soft-hearted

in many respects.

F: So that if you really wanted to take a negative stance, you couldn't pull it off.

H: Well, there were many very loyal Johnson supporters up on the Hill who always said that he paid more attention to the people who were fighting him than the people who were helping him. And I think there may be a good deal of truth in that. He was always trying to court the people who were giving him a hard time, often to the exclusion of the people who were voting with him right down the line.

F: Well, does this give lie in part to that charge that he never forgets an opponent, he never forgets an insult or a slight, but remembers forever and gets even somewhere down the line?

H: Oh, I doubt if he ever forgets, but I've never seen him particularly preoccupied with getting even.

F: He doesn't burn with revenge, you don't think?

H: No.

F: Some of us who have known the President over the years have the feeling that he was miscast in his television role. Would you agree with that, and if so, what do you think the difficulty was?

H: Well, I don't know whether "miscast" is the word or not. Certainly he was ill at ease in front of a camera and he came off, I don't think, well--He didn't come off the way those of us who knew him and worked with him knew him to be. He wasn't natural. I think he was stiff. But I don't know what the solution to it was. He had that one great press conference when he used the lavalier mike--that was when? in the fall of '67--and he knew what the public response was. He saw the editorials; he got the phone calls and the letters from people. And that was the--the country saw, I guess for the first time on national television, what the real Lyndon

Johnson was like--cleaned up a little bit. And he never did it again. He obviously knew what the answer was, whether he was afraid--not afraid, but cautious--because he was occupying the office of the Presidency that he shouldn't say anything. Maybe he didn't have the confidence that he could consistently carry it off without making a faux pas. I just don't know. I don't know what the answer was, but I think it helped to destroy him. Helped to bring him down. The country never really knew what they had.

F: Did you, in your duties, have much direct contact with the press?

H: With the press? No. I stayed as far away from the press as I could.

F: Did you have the feeling that you ever shaped the President's thinking through your own speech writing?

H: Oh, sure, you had--you never shaped his basic philosophy--you had a great opportunity to help shape programs and come up with new ideas.

F: Where do you think you had particular impact?

H: Well, basically, domestic affairs is where I was working mostly.

F: Which domestic affairs--there were a lot of them.

H: It's very hard to think--certainly in the area of conservation you are always coming up--have the opportunity come up with new ideas.

F: Did you find the President and Stewart Udall working together pretty closely on conservation? At least until the last weeks?

H: Very, at least until the last week. Stewart Udall made a statement that--a month or so before the end of the Administration--he said he didn't want to make any comparisons because he loved President Kennedy, but he felt that Lyndon Johnson had more of a feel for the land.

F: Where did he make this statement?

H: In the Cabinet Room, a briefing in there. He said that he felt President

Kennedy was a man of the sea. President Johnson was a man of the land. He got almost everything he wanted from the President, and the President had a feel for it.

F: Bob, you had some opportunities to observe the President's character, and a lot of people have felt that in a sense as much as any President we have had, Lyndon Johnson's character sort of engulfed the scene and made the years from 1963 to 1969 as much as events. Could you comment on this?

H: From the very first time I met him, I was extremely fond of the man, had a great deal of love and affection for him. I think he was--the press built certain aspects of his character completely out of proportion. His temper that they were always writing about--temper tantrums--I've seen him lose his temper out of irritation, but I've never really seen the wild temper trantrums that the press talked about. During the three-and-a-half years or four years that I worked for him, he never once raised his voice at me. I was never on the firing line the way some of the staff people were who were in constant contact with him; he was never anything but the soul of courtesy. I think he was very misunderstood. And also he's a very funny man. I've always felt that he's the funniest man since W. C. Fields, and quite often people who see him think he's chewing somebody out, he's really digging them and if you understand that, then it's a very delightful thing, even when he's doing it to you.

F: It's kind of a form of humor that is a little affectionate and a little needling?

H: That's right. You asked a minute ago about my contact with the press. The first week or so I was there, I went up to his quarters, to his dining room to have lunch with him. He sat there and he said, "Just keep your name out of the newspapers. That's all." He said, "A speech writer is supposed to stay in the background. If somebody asks you about a speech,

say 'I just don't know anything about that. That's somebody else's department.' Just stay away from the press. I don't know. People come and they go and they do a good job, but they never seem to get the message." And that's one message I got very loud and clear.

F: You almost sound like him on that. There's a rumor that really he never fired anyone, never could bring himself to dismiss anyone. Do you believe that?

H: I believe that's true. And I think it hurt him. A lot of people should have been fired.

F: But what do you think it is, a sort of innate kindness?

H: I think so. He can talk gruffly, but when it comes right down to it, I just don't think he can see himself throwing somebody out in the street.

F: Well, I wondered. I have kind of gotten the impression that he is loyal even to those people he doesn't like particularly.

H: That's right. I think that's right. And if they have done a good job for him, even if they weren't particularly loyal to him, he remembers that too. He's a very complex man. You can't pin him down. I don't think anybody will ever be able to pin him down.

F: Thank you, Bob.

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By Robert L. Hardesty

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, Robert L. Hardesty, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

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