INTERVIEW II

DATE: February 17, 1977

NTERVIEWEE: ANNA ROSENBERG HOFFMAN

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Mrs. Hoffman's office, New York City

Tape 1 of 1

H: I wasn't active on the passage of the Selective Service Act, but I heard a story about it that I later found was true. General Walter Bedell Smith told me that one vote was needed. At that time, I think General Smith was the congressional liaison with the Pentagon on this. General Smith was a great fisherman, and he invited a congressman who always wanted to go fishing with him to go on the day the vote was going to be taken because he knew this congressman was against selective service. The congressman couldn't withstand the temptation to fish with such an expert fisherman as General Smith, and the Act passed by one vote.

G: This was the one in 1941, right before World War II?

H: Yes, that was in 1941.

G: Let's go back now to the early years. I wanted to ask you again if you can elaborate on the friendship between Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson.

H: I think in my early interview I told you how President Roosevelt at that time called my attention to Congressman Lyndon Johnson and told me of his high hopes [for him], which I think he felt were fulfilled.

To the best of my knowledge, their relations were good. I know that Lyndon Johnson as a congressman fought very hard and supported almost all of President Roosevelt's social legislation. Also, [he supported] his legislation in the selective service area. I don't recall any real criticism that President Roosevelt ever made to me about Congressman Johnson. He was apt to, if he got angry at someone, just pass a remark, maybe a belittling remark that he might forget about, and two weeks later would not realize that he said it. To my recollection, I don't recall any such remark about Lyndon Johnson.

G: Did Lyndon Johnson ever talk to you about President Roosevelt and his friendship with him, in retrospect?

H: I think he was very proud of his relationship with President Roosevelt. When he was in Congress he often talked to me about it. If I would bring to his attention something on which the President would like action, he would go all out and talk about President Roosevelt. I think this was one of his great prides even after he was president. When I told him a complimentary story about himself by President Roosevelt, he would make me repeat it saying, "You sure he felt that way?" He was very, very proud of his relations [with President Roosevelt].

His relations were not so good with Mrs. Roosevelt. I don't recall exactly on what subjects, but I know that the first time there was trouble in Congress on the civil rights issue, Mrs. Roosevelt criticized him in her column. He was very unhappy about it.

G: What did he say, do you know?

H: He asked me to come to Washington, and he said, "Look what Mrs. Roosevelt wrote about me. It isn't fair. She doesn't know the whole story. I had to do this in order to save any of it." He had to make some compromise. Mrs. Roosevelt was not for compromises when she wanted to get something done. She was critical of it. He would say to me, "Talk to Mrs. Roosevelt. Will you explain to her what this is?" And I said, "Of course, I'd be glad to." I'd explain it to her. He watched her column. He was very, very sensitive about any criticism from her. I don't think it was a very loving relation between the two.

G: Did you ever talk to her about him?

H: Oh, yes, I did. I did about this column and explained the situation to her. If I recall correctly, she made some correction, alluded to it in some way. But their styles were so different that I don't think they were often on the same wavelength.

G: What was Lyndon Johnson like when he was a young congressman? What were your impressions of him?

H: Eager, terribly hard working, determined to get things done, very much under the guidance of Sam Rayburn.

G: Did you ever see them together?

H: Oh, yes. Yes. Mr. Sam really felt like [he had] a son-father relationship with Lyndon Johnson. He was his protege. Lyndon Johnson did listen to him a great deal. Mr. Sam was expert on how to manage the Congress, how to get things done. He taught Lyndon Johnson a great deal because Lyndon Johnson as a leader of the Senate became the past master of anybody who ever handled the Congress. It was a very good

relationship. He had great respect for Mr. Sam, and great affection, I think.

G: I get the impression that after he moved to the Senate he also had a similar relationship with Richard Russell, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee.

H: No, I don't believe that. He had a good relationship with Richard Russell. Senator Russell was a much colder, much more reserved man. I don't think there was that kind of filial relation between them; I think there was a good relation. Lyndon Johnson had the ability to gain the most he could from people. He learned from Russell.

G: How did he do that?

H: I'm not saying this in criticism, far from it. I think that he knew that Russell had been chairman of the Armed Services Committee for a long time, that he had tremendous experience. He would ask him questions, and he would listen to him. Those days he was a good listener, and he learned a great deal from everybody and put it to work. I think both Rayburn and Russell and other old-timers taught him a great deal. But Lyndon outdid them all in running the Senate, practically with an iron hand. Lyndon Johnson never let a subject come up on the floor of the Senate without his knowing beforehand where every vote would go. This is the job of a leader.

G: Do you recall a particular example of his using his skill there?

H: Well, one can almost recall every piece of difficult legislation that went through when he was the leader of the Democratic Senate. In the past few years, too often bills were lost because the leadership

didn't have a count or didn't know what would take place. This didn't happen with Lyndon Johnson. He knew exactly where every vote was going. If it was a difficult bill and, if he could, he would delay action until he was sure. One saw the difference when he left the Senate.

G: You mentioned before we turned on the tape that in approaching him on health legislation while he was president he said that he couldn't be in favor of it, and you said, "But you were in favor of it when you were in the Senate." Can you tell that story?

H: He was very good on health legislation because he himself was interested in it. But as time went on terrific financial demands were made on the presidency. Sometimes I would say to him, "We've got to have more money for heart research or for cancer research." He would say, "Look, I can't do it. I can't appropriate more," or, "I can't go along with this piece of legislation." I would say to him, "Don't forget, you sponsored this. You were the one who really got it along. You can't let it die." He was very good about it. Health legislation, education legislation--he was excellent on these. Of course, when the stresses of Vietnam came, there was a natural slackening in social legislation to take care of the demands of Vietnam.

G: Do you recall working with him on any particular health legislation?

H: I can't recall one. I worked on so many of them, I can't recall which ones.

G: But is there a particular instance?

H: Mary Lasker can give you more on this. She really worked with him on originating legislation. He would talk to me and I would work with him, but Mrs. Lasker was really the spark plug behind health legislation in the United States. Have you interviewed her yet?

G: Yes, we have an interview, and I hope we can see her again.

You mentioned his affinity for education legislation. Can you tell me the genesis of this?

H: Yes. Whenever we talked about education legislation he would bring up the subject of how interested he was in it. He would tell the story of when he was a schoolteacher, how children didn't have the opportunity to learn, how some of the schools were difficult even to get to. He was determined that the children of the generation when he was in the Congress and president would have the opportunity for education. He was greatly influenced by his childhood. He would talk time and time again about the children in his school--how he sometimes brought them food because they didn't have any. The free lunch program that he supported so strongly resulted from the time he was a teacher and saw children come to school hungry. When he talked about his early childhood, he would say, "My mother had to lug pails of water every day from the well. I'm going to see that no woman ever has to do that again." He was terribly interested in agricultural legislation. He didn't forget his early surroundings.

G: Was there something in his early experience that led him into the Head Start program, for example?

H: Well, his whole feeling for children.

G: Did he ever talk about anything in particular on Head Start?

H: Well, he often talked about the children in his school--he remembered many by name--and the difficulties they had. I think his social legislation and his feeling for people came from his childhood and his early days as a teacher.

G: Now on these two areas of education and health, I gather that you and Mary Lasker and others were prodding him into action. Did he ever prod you into action on these sorts of things?

H: No, except when a piece of legislation would come up that he knew we were interested in. Then he would say, "Now you better see some of your friends in the Congress to see that they line up for it." He would make sure that one did the job. I don't say that I prodded him; I might have focused attention. I would say that Mary Lasker prodded him a lot; but [we would] focus attention to certain programs. This became harder to do in the last few years when the stresses and strains on him were enormous.

G: Let's talk about Lyndon Johnson and his relations with some of the people in the New York community, particularly Herbert Lehman.

H: Herbert Lehman was, in my estimation, a great man and a great gentleman, a very sensitive and a very gentle person. Their methods of work were entirely different. I don't think that Herbert Lehman was very fond of Johnson. I'm saying this, and maybe I shouldn't, because he never said that. But I know that their approaches were different.

One could not tell Herbert Lehman to go down the line for a bill because it was a Democratic piece of legislation. Herbert Lehman was a good Democrat, but he had to be convinced emotionally and intellectually that a piece of legislation was what the country needed. That was a different approach from Lyndon's.

G: Did you ever try to explain one man to the other?

H: In conversation I always would. When I had an opportunity, I would enumerate some of the great things Lyndon Johnson had done, and Lehman appreciated them. But I don't think personality-wise they clicked.

G: Did Lyndon Johnson appreciate Herbert Lehman?

H: I think within limits.

G: Do you think he considered him impractical?

H: It is so hard to guess that; but I don't know, Lyndon was an impatient man. I'm sure he didn't consider Herbert Lehman the politician he was. But Lehman was so respected in New York and so loved that his endorsement of a candidate meant a great deal in New York.

G: Did you help him in his relations with any other political figure from New York?

H: I don't recall names, but one was always explaining him to people who didn't quite understand him, especially in the last years when people who were strongly against Vietnam turned very strongly against him and seemed to forget all the things Lyndon had done. People who were strong for civil rights seemed to forget what was accomplished by his civil rights speech and what he did and judged him wholly by Vietnam.

I fought very hard with many people here in New York and all over the country. He was so belligerent about himself that I think in the last few years he antagonized many people by his belligerence. He was like a little boy in some ways. When he felt he didn't have approval, he bellowed and tried to show strength when what he really wanted was approval. To me it's a great tragedy that he didn't live long enough to be appreciated. If he had lived longer and would have remained in the public eye making speeches, et cetera, I think much of the attitude against him would have changed.

G: I notice that some of your suggestions to him during the time he was president and having some problems were how to improve his presentations, his apparent failure to come across well over television.

H: Yes, but that was just incidental.

G: What do you think was the cause of that?

H: One of the problems I think was that he came across too strong. Think of Carter now and his low key approach; that wasn't Lyndon Johnson and it wouldn't have fitted his style, and wouldn't have fitted those days. Those days people wanted more strength from the presidency. Today they don't. Today they want an entirely different level, or think they do. But, as you know, almost every statesman or president who was good on television took some lessons. President Ford--remember his speech at the Republican convention? You couldn't believe it was the same man. He gave a forceful, dramatic speech. He admitted that for weeks before he rehearsed with a teacher. I'm not sure about

Lyndon. I think at times he came across very well, but he always wanted suggestions for improvement.

G: Did you ever talk to him about it.

H: Oh, he would say, "What did you think of my talk?" And I would say, "Well, I thought here and there--I would say it was a good talk." If one didn't begin that way, one didn't get very far unless the speech was really bad, and I don't think he made many bad ones. But I would say, "Now, look, I talked to people. They just didn't get this feeling. You didn't get it across here. You dropped it too soon. You didn't develop it." Or, "Be a little lower key, make people feel you're talking to them." I used to tell him the story about Roosevelt's fireside chats on radio. If one got in a taxi the next morning, the taxi driver would say, "Roosevelt said to me--" People felt he talked to them directly. They didn't feel it was a speech to the country. He talked to them. I used to say, "Talk to one person. Think of one person and talk." Roosevelt used to do that. Sometimes he'd say, "Sit down in the front room there. I'm going to talk to you." He would pick someone to talk to. I used to say to Lyndon, "Think of someone. Think you're talking to Mrs. Johnson. Think you're talking to Mr. Sam and talk that way. Approach it that way. Once people are down on you about something, you don't come across well." He would try at times.

G: Let's talk about what you characterized as Lyndon Johnson's early distrust of the military. How was this manifest?

H: Well, all through the hearings when I was assistant secretary of defense--he would ride the military terribly hard at the hearings. He would question me at the hearings at great length about things that should have been questions to the military. He was suspicious of them. They couldn't sell him a bill of goods most of the time.

G: Did he ever talk to you about his thoughts on the military?

H: He would say to me, "Now stop being taken in. You ought to have more sense than believe that," about something that I would have come and see him [about]. Or he would send for me, and I would say, "But look, this is so. I've checked on it myself." He was very suspicious, but not without cause. The military can do a very good snow job.

G: He was a hard man to win an argument with, I suppose.

H: That's right. To try to do a snow job on him just didn't work. He was very tough on them. I used to say to him, "Look, these are dedicated men. They believe in this. Of course they want military supremacy. Of course they want the latest and the best equipment always; that's their job." After he became president he listened to them completely.

G: Why do you feel that?

H: He became the commander in chief. They became part of him instead of someone on the outside. This is my guess. Also, when I spoke to him he said, "It's entirely different now. I'm responsible for the lives of the men." He had that feeling, and that these are the people, after all, who know how to fight a war.

G: You think that's one of the factors that led him into Vietnam?

H: Well, he was in Vietnam. I mean, he couldn't help it very much. But that led him further into Vietnam, I'm positive. He believed, and I think he almost had to believe to be able to go on, that the military know how to fight a war. They are the experts. He didn't recognize them as experts before, but he did when he was president. He was very, very heartbroken about the casualties in Vietnam. He would go down to the operations room at all hours to get the news. He felt the responsibility for those men himself. He felt that very strongly.

G: I wanted to ask you to elaborate on this Kennedy bill which he asked you to comment on in 1958.

H: I don't remember now in detail.

G: You indicated that he called you, perhaps in California.

H: Yes, he did, and then he sent me a letter to California which was sent back to me in New York.

G: I take it he was not in full accord with your recommendations on the Kennedy bill. You wanted him to do something that he didn't want to do or feel he could do. You mentioned earlier that he got rather upset.

H: I don't know what my comments were. I don't really remember the Kennedy bill clearly. My God, I've seen so many bills since and commented on so many that I don't remember what my comments were. But I don't think we were very far apart on the Kennedy bill. I don't really remember that we were very far apart because I don't think he was wholly for it. Neither was I. I merely gave some suggestions.

G: As I noted before we turned on the tape, he presented you with one of the pens that he used to sign the Medicare bill. Do you have any recollection of that, or what he said at the time?

H: I have quite a few pens from him given at the signing of a bill. He would give a pen to me and say, "You worked hard on this." He even sometimes would say, "This was your idea," and I'd be very embarrassed because there would be congressmen there who thought it was their idea.

G: Are you thinking of a particular incident?

H: No. But I remember one. I don't know what bill it was. He was never reluctant to give a person credit for something. That was one of his lovable traits, because many presidents don't--and they should. You give them an idea and, if it's good, it should be theirs; if it isn't, they should throw it out. But Lyndon would remember and say, "Remember, you gave me that idea." And he would say it before others, not just to you alone. All this was in the early days.

G: Let's talk a little about your idea of inviting black heroes to meet with the President and work to help alleviate riots during 1967.

H: Well, if I recall, that was just one idea. The black people really didn't appreciate their own heroes, and for the President to give recognition to their heroes I thought would do a great deal for their personal pride. I thought it was the time when this kind of gesture would be helpful. That's all I remember about it.

G: You proposed this in response to--?

H: Sometimes he asked, "What should we do?" I proposed a lot of other things; this was just one of the outward gestures, not the substance.

G: I wanted to get you to talk about that luncheon that you arranged for him at Club Twenty-One.

H: That was very funny. It was summertime I think, or early summer. He called me up and said, "You know, I don't know any of the important New York newspaper people, owners or editors, or the television people. Have them for lunch on Saturday." This was, I think, on a Monday or early in the week. I said, "Lyndon, it's summer. Most of those people are not in New York now. You can't get them that quickly." "Oh, yes you can. Now go ahead and do it." I said, "All right. I'll select certain ones and ask them. We'll have it at Twenty-One." He called me back and said, "Dave Sarnoff will pay for it. He'll help you." I got mad. I said, "Lyndon, when I give a lunch, I pay for it. I don't need any help. David Sarnoff is going to be invited, and he should come. He can't help me with getting the people because the other network people don't want an invitation from him, nor do I need him for editors. I'll thank him." "Oh," he said, "why don't you have him pay?" I said, "Because I wouldn't. If I'm inviting people in my name it's going to be my lunch." So we had the lunch. I had everybody there; I asked people to come even if it would be inconvenient. People were curious about Lyndon. It was amazing. People like Bill Paley, people from the Times--they really didn't know him. We had a very full attendance and it was a private lunch.

G: How many people were there?

H: I don't recall. There must have been thirty, thirty-five people. He talked. I never heard him better. He was relaxed. He was friendly.

He was open. I asked that whatever he said be off the record. I asked that from everybody I invited. They respected it, and [when] they came away the comments were all, "God, we didn't know how good this man was, how able." Lyndon was very pleased with it.

G: Why do you think he wanted the luncheon to begin with?

H: Because he didn't know the heads of the newspapers or the chains, people like Roy Howard of the Scripps-Howard newspapers and the old [New York] World - [Telegram &] Sun. He knew reporters who covered the Hill, but he didn't know the top echelon at all. Very wisely, he felt that it was important for him to know the reporters. If they were favorable to him, he felt that his words would be received in better spirits. He was 100 per cent right. And he thought I could help with this. I didn't want a job. I didn't want anything, so there was no reluctance about calling me up. He knew I was a friend, and that was it.

G: Did you do anything else like that for him in New York to improve his relations with this group or promote his candidacy on another occasion?

H: I don't recall that big a group.

G: Well, smaller groups?

H: No, not that way. I would go with him to some labor functions.

G: Really? When did you do that?

H: If he spoke at a big labor rally I went with him because I knew the labor people very well.

G: He toured New York in 1964.

H: Yes, and got a terrific reception.

G: Were you there?

H: I was at the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union with him.

G: Can you describe your recollections of that?

H: Well, I've never seen crowds like that. It was the old-timers, as you know, who really knew what it meant to be in America, to have an American president who cared for them. It was the most unbelievable reception you can think of. Dave Dubinsky turned everybody out. Every workshop stopped working; they were all out. Lyndon was moved by it. Who wouldn't have been? As far as one could see, nothing but people up and down the avenue, nothing but people standing like sardines and just looking at him with worshipful eyes. And everything he said just brought the house down. This, as you know, is like adrenalin to a candidate.

G: That's fascinating. That was perhaps one of his best appearances ever in New York, wasn't it?

H: He had the most appreciative audience.

G: He used to come up for these Al Smith Dinners that they'd have every year. Did you ever go to one of those?

H: No. Oh, I went to one, yes, but not when he was there. But there was not that kind of enthusiasm. People pay too much for those dinners to respond the way the labor people do.

G: I wanted to get you to elaborate on your opposition to Vietnam and discussions with him about it.

H: Well, one couldn't very well have discussions. One could merely say some things to him. I felt that we were drawn into a civil war and

that we really had no place there. He didn't bring us into the Vietnam conflict, which most people now forget. He escalated it because the military believed that they could win. There was no way to win. There's no way to win a civil war. The enemy melted away before we could get there. We did huge bombing and hit a teacup. It was just a hopeless situation, and I felt that we ought to admit it. I was very sympathetic to him, knowing that he didn't bring it on. But I felt the time had come when somebody had to take action to get us out of there before we lost more men and the respect of the world.

G: Was there ever, to your knowledge, a concerted effort on the part of his friends who felt this way to organize?

H: You couldn't organize with him like that. I think many of his friends spoke to him about it.

G: Do you know any others who did?

H: I don't want to mention names. I don't know well enough. But I'm sure people did.

G: Before we turned on the tape you talked about the commissions. You indicated that many of them didn't do too much in terms of . . . .

H: I think that's the history of government commissions, many of them. I've served on many commissions. Some of them were useful. And maybe five years after the commission submitted its report someone would pick up something out of it. But I firmly believe that too much money is appropriated for commissions, and the result is that too many studies are made. I was on the income maintenance commission.

G: Was that the Heineman Commission?

H: Yes. We got two million dollars. Every academician in the country, practically, had an assignment to work on some aspect. The piles of papers were this high. The members never could read it all. I believe if one is on a commission it is because of one's own knowledge of the situation. Sure you get data and statistics and information, but in the end, it's got to be your own conviction that has to be brought into play. On most commissions, too many papers are prepared. Most of the members never read them. The income maintenance commission was a good commission. It made a good report, but it was never used because by the time it came out the economy started to grow all over again. The commission was started when the economy was in depression.

I also served on the Conquest of Cancer Commission; Benno Schmidt was chairman of it. We turned back more than half the money. And it was a good commission, and we got the legislation across. We got the first big cancer research grant, [which] was at that time 540 million dollars. That was under President Nixon.

G: Did Johnson help you with that?

H: No, that was under President Nixon. Johnson was dead by then. But generally regarding commissions, I think they should get just enough money to have a staff and do a little research, and not get reports from all over the academic world.

G: Did you ever talk to President Johnson about your belief that commissions have too much funds?

H: I did, but I felt more strongly later on.

G: You also served on the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial Commission, didn't you?

H: Yes. I still am on it. That's a tragic thing.

G: Did Johnson work with you at all on that?

H: No, it wasn't in his time. The legislation was passed later and the first meeting in the White House to talk about it was with President Kennedy.

G: I wanted to ask you if you have any particular reminiscences on Mrs. Johnson's beautification efforts?

H: I think Mary Lasker was greatly instrumental in getting her to think about it nationally.

G: You've had a lot of experience with the Congress. Did you ever participate in efforts to get the legislation through the Congress without being altered in a way that you didn't want it to be altered?

H: I very often worked on congressional [matters].

G: What did you do?

H: If you had enough information and conviction, you talked to the people in the Congress who happened to be concerned with that particular matter. I was concerned with a lot of social legislation. I did a lot of that for President Roosevelt.

G: Do you recall working on a particular beautification measure in the Congress?

H: I think there was one, and I know I wrote letters and talked to Congress. Yes. Mrs. Johnson did a marvelous job. You see, she did it in Texas

before she became the President's wife. In Texas she planted bluebonnets. In Washington she was very sympathetic to all beautification efforts. She was very friendly with Laurance Rockefeller, who is very much interested in beautification--not in the type of beautification Mary Lasker and I are, but in regard to national parks, etc. Mrs. Johnson was interested in that aspect too.

G: I know there was some opposition from various interest groups, people who opposed the elimination of a lot of the billboards on the freeways.

H: Yes.

G: Do you recall any of the--?

H: It went through like all other bills in Congress. There's opposition, and there are people who are for it. Mrs. Johnson was very popular on the Hill.

G: Did you do any work on that?

H: I imagine I did. I don't recall how much. But if I am interested in something, I always do some work on it.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

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