

INTERVIEWEE: LUTHER HOLCOMB (Tape #1)

INTERVIEWER: T. H. BAKER

June 24, 1969

B: This is the interview with Luther Holcomb. Sir, to begin in the beginning, do you recall when you first met Mr. Johnson?

H: Yes, I can reconstruct. It was during the campaign of--the one when W. Lee O'Daniel ran.

B: The senatorial campaign?

H: Yes. I wrote down some dates here. I believe it was 1941.

B: It would have been the first time Mr. Johnson tried for the Senate.

H: I first met him then. Now if you would just like for me informally to develop how we--

B: Please do.

H: It was after he was later elected to the Senate, I was serving as pastor of a residential church in Dallas, Texas.

B: That would have been Lakewood Baptist?

H: Lakewood Baptist Church in Dallas. I also took a rather active part in community affairs. So one day a Jewish mother comes to see me and indicates that her son is being discriminated against at a military installation. I at first thought, well, it was just a mother's concern, but I did a little checking on my own with individuals in a community near the military installation and felt that there was some validity to what she was saying.

So, as I say, I had met him, but it was just like anyone in public life; it had just been a handshake in the midst of a crowd.

B: That's all it was back in the '41 campaign?

H: That's right. So I sat down and wrote a letter where I did my best to describe what the mother had said to me and asked the senator to do something about it. The one who happened to receive the letter in the senator's office was a Roman Catholic convert. So this particular individual takes the letter in to Senator Johnson and said, "You know, I have the strangest letter here from a Baptist pastor written in regard to a discrimination against a Jewish boy, and here I am a Roman Catholic, bringing it to your attention!"

B: Do you recall who that was?

H: Yes, that was Walter Jenkins, which I will later develop. So the senator read the letter and told Mr. Jenkins that, "Maybe you'd better check the writer of this letter out."

So it developed that they called a man named Irving Goldberg, who had been in the Navy with Senator Johnson and, of course, who is now a judge on the Fifth Circuit. It so happens that Irving Goldberg and I had become very good friends in Dallas, working in inter-faith causes--National Conference of Christians and Jews, and other activities. So Irving did not tell me that he had received a call, but he told Walter Jenkins to tell the senator that he could rely on anything that I'd said. He admitted that the letter was a bit unusual, and he did not know any of the facts, but he urged them to rely on what I had said.

So then Senator Johnson told Walter Jenkins, "Suppose you write him and tell that if he ever has any occasion to be in Washington that we certainly would like for him to come by the office."

I appreciated the letter that they wrote me. I was serving on

the Dallas Housing Authority, and once or twice a year there would be occasions when I would come to Washington for the housing authority. It so happened that about six weeks after this letter, I wrote to the senator. Walter Jenkins replied by asking me to have dinner with him. He said that his wife had to go to a PTA meeting.

We met at Harvey's Restaurant, which is near the Mayflower Hotel. I look back upon it; it was a very interesting evening. I'm sure that Walter Jenkins was trying to size me up, and I had no real motive at all.

So then Walter asked me the next day to come by, did not make an appointment, but if it was convenient that the senator would like to see me. As I recall, that was when a lady named Dorothy Nichols--I believe she's Mrs. Phillips now--she had a desk I believe at that time in the same room with Senator Johnson. Walter sent me in, and we visited awhile.

So I would have to say from the writing of that letter, as I look back across the years now, in many respects perhaps the best friend that I had was Walter Jenkins. Now religion never entered into it. Walter had previously been a Baptist, and he finally told me one day that when he was just a child, four or five years old, that in the typical custom of the Southwest his mother had taken him to a meeting where my father was preaching. They put the children on a pallet and hoped they'd be quiet.

But anyway, I then developed such an appreciation for Walter Jenkins until a communication somewhat like this said that I would like to reveal my appreciation for Walter Jenkins by rendering any service that I could to Senator Johnson.

Dallas was never a Johnson stronghold. Walter told me that as we were approaching different campaigns for me to participate, but anything I did to more or less clear or discuss with a man named Robert L. Clark. Robert Clark was a brother of Justice Tom Clark. Robert Clark had been an attorney in Dallas for many years but was viewed as being very astute politically. He had handled campaigns for Senator Connally and had just been very active, but I would say that it was the kind of activity that was never manifested by being a candidate himself. I do not know that he ever carried the title of campaign manager.

Then Walter said for me likewise to discuss things with Irving Goldberg.

So that's where what had been a friendship became a very warm friendship with Robert L. Clark and with Irving Goldberg. I believe in every campaign that Senator Johnson was in I was listed as being on the county committee for him.

I likewise in the campaign of 1956--this is an instance I ought to relate. The Democratic Party in Texas has always had a pattern almost back to the days of Sam Houston of feuding a great deal. So the Democratic party was divided, and we decided to have a harmony meeting in Dallas and invited Mr. Truman to be the speaker. At the time the two leading hotels in Dallas--one was the Adolphus--the suite there was occupied by Mr. Truman; then Speaker Sam Rayburn was there. But Robert L. Clark had taken a suite for Senator Johnson in the Baker Hotel just across the street. We had arranged to have dinner in the suite, as I recall. In addition to Mr. Clark, Mary Rather was there, and I believe Irving Goldberg. There must have

just about ten or twelve. We were all told to be in the suite because we were all going to have dinner, then we'd go immediately to the municipal auditorium, which was not too far from there, for the speech by former President Truman. Mr. Truman was to be introduced by Senator Johnson.

As we were all seated around in the suite--they'd already arranged the table--in comes Senator Johnson by himself. Frankly, he appeared as someone who almost had rushed across the street; he appeared out of breath. To those of us who knew him, we could tell that something was on his mind. Rather than going around the room as he usually did greeting everybody with a good deal of zest, he walked over to the nearest chair and just sat down. The room was somewhat--everybody was saying--in those days some were calling him Lyndon; most would say, "Hello, Senator," something of that nature --so all at once, as I remember it was Bob Clark who said, "What's the matter, Senator?".

He said, and he spoke very low, "The Speaker just announced me for the presidency."

Sure enough, Rayburn had called a press conference over in the Adolphus Hotel without saying anything to anyone about it and made the announcement. Mr. Rayburn, of course, was very serious about it, but he also said to some of us later that evening in a little bit of a spirit of levity, "That ought to be one way of getting Texas Democrats together. I'd about decided that Harry (he called him Harry) was not going to be able to do it."

So in other words we went on in a motorcade, and nothing had been prepared in the script or in the evening to even mention, so

no one said anything about what had taken place in the press conference. But by the time the motorcade got back to the hotel, it was already in the early editions of the paper, and that was the main thing--that "Lyndon Johnson announces for the presidency." That was the heading. Then of course the story contained what Mr. Rayburn had said.

B: Could you tell at that time if Senator Johnson saw any real serious prospects of getting the nomination for presidency or vice presidency? It was known generally that the favorite son idea was at least partly a ploy to hold the delegation together. Could there have been anything more in it?

H: That's a little difficult to say. I would think that that was maybe the beginning of what culminated in 1960 because in 1960, as you know, Mr. Rayburn was the one who nominated him. I would say that whether he thought about it, it was a part of history. I think that would be the point I would want to make. I think he knew in politics you do not always know just what is going to happen. As I recall, it was in that next convention where he did place in nomination I believe the name of Senator Kennedy for Vice President. Wasn't that right?

B: It would be in '56.

H: Yes. And so what I'm trying to say, he might not have been in a position to do that, and I think it all ties together to the later development. We went back to the Adolphus that night, and we were all at that time in this suite that was occupied by Mr. Rayburn. Mr. Rayburn did have his two sisters there, but as I recall they went on to--one lived in Dallas, and I believe the one from Bonham went on home with the one in Dallas. But I would say the discussion

after the meeting--by that time it was more than just our little group. The suite was crowded with different ones from different parts of the state, and they were all eager to have a word with Senator Johnson.

Now it was after that experience that I took it upon myself to write a letter to every individual in my precinct--you have to know the type of precinct when I say my precinct, that was a precinct that had been about as anti-Johnson as you could get. I did check the letter with Mr. Clark, with Irving Goldberg. I wrote a letter though myself. I remember it was at a time when Peter Marshall was quite a popular and widely heralded minister. He would have been in that period somewhat like Billy Graham today. And Mrs. Peter Marshall had come to Dallas and made a speech for the meeting honoring all the clergymen of the city, sponsored by the Community Chest. So I put in the letter a prayer that Peter Marshall had written the day before an election. Now of course it was a prayer in his beautiful language underscoring their right to vote and responsibility of participating. The interesting thing about my letter is that for the first time the anti-Johnson forces--and I don't mean when I say anti-Johnson forces that they viewed him as a cause to oppose--they had largely been at that period what we termed--of course they later became good friends. Mr. Allan Shivers was--the contest was really who would head the delegation. But Mr. Rayburn later told me that he felt that that was the most crucial campaign in the life of Lyndon Johnson; that his prestige would have suffered a blow. And Mr. Rayburn was the one that thought it was time to have a confrontation. Governor Shivers had complete control of the precinct. It was a strong middle-class

precinct. It was in east Dallas and it had about two thousand in the precinct, so it was not the largest, but it was [not] by far the smallest.

So, on Sunday after my letter was received I made it clear that I was doing as a citizen--I should inject this into it--that all of my efforts for Senator Johnson were as a volunteer. I always took the role that I had a right as a citizen to do whatever I wanted to. Nevertheless I did get, I remember, on a Sunday morning, twelve special delivery letters within a hour and a half telling me they were withdrawing from the church that I served as pastor. It later developed, when I shared some of the names with people, they'd all been just devoted followers of Coke Stevenson. So there was a group in Texas that could never really overcome that particular campaign.

Then we come to the actual precinct meeting. We had the largest attendance at the precinct that they ever had. But of course those who had been in control of the precinct worked harder than ever before. So we did not prevail in the precinct. But in later years the climate did change, and Mr. Johnson received quite a substantial vote.

Now in all of this that I'm relating--I may be going too much in detail--I'd have to say that I was engaged in weekly telephone conversations with Walter Jenkins. So we go on through that.

I did go to Chicago. I would imagine that Irving Goldberg served kind of like a doorkeeper for the suite. In those days there was not a big staff around. There was not a lot of space. However, the Johnson facilities had been set up as a prospective nominee.

B: This is in '56?

H: That's right, in Chicago. My role there was largely to be available to run any errands, to do anything that I could.

Then moving it on, coming to 1960--.

B: Can I interrupt?

H: Sure. You interrupt anywhere.

B: Actually you're doing fine, but I was just wondering if in these years you had gotten to know Senator Johnson well enough, or had talked to him often enough, to form any opinion about his ideas and attitudes in those years.

H: This would be a good place for me to inject this, because there has been so much written about President Johnson being a slave-driver. I happened to have seen another side. In addition to Walter Jenkins, I guess I was about as close a friend of Mr. and Mrs. Stegall. I would say that Glen Stegall--the President was very fond of him. The Stegalls, as a couple, I think played not just a unique, I think they played a vital part in the life of Lyndon Johnson. So I'm going to answer you this way. In addition, there were other staff members, as I've mentioned--Dorothy Nichols--that I knew. But I'd have to say that the three my mind always turns to would be Glen and Mildred and Walter. I had such complete devotion to them until I would not want to claim that I had close personal exposure to Senator Johnson. I felt like I knew him better through them than any other way. To be sure, rarely was I ever with Walter that I was not present when there was a telephone conversation between Walter and Senator Johnson. Sometimes they were rather lengthy conversations.

What was the date of the heart attack?

B: 1955.

H: I was the first one to communicate with Walter after the heart attack, and I communicated with him more or less because I knew--what I'm trying to say, there was a devotion between these people. It was not a question of a job being at stake. They felt toward Senator Johnson closer than they would maybe with a member of their own family. And it was not just a fanatical loyalty. The times that I've been around them there was a naturalness. Each one seemed to understand the mind of the other. I gained a feel that--you've heard of friendships that sometimes conversation was not necessary. There might be periods of silence. Then there'd be other periods of great enthusiasm.

I also remember that when it was generally known that President Johnson was getting ready to return to activity, Walter was in Waco setting up a meeting at Lake Whitney. I remember going to Waco and telling Walter how I remembered all of them in prayer. Mrs. Johnson wrote to me several times during the illness, and I wrote to her. I remember the cost of the tickets that night were \$10 each. Gosh, we just didn't know whether people would--even though a man was returning--I remember that I bought four tickets, and I thought that was the greatest sacrifice that anyone could make.

Then of course I returned to Dallas and came back to Lake Whitney the actual night. They had Grace Tully there. Grace Tully had become a part of the Johnson setup at that time. Jim Wright, the congressman from Fort Worth, was the speaker that night. It was a typical rural setting. But it was, as I recall, to be broadcast, perhaps over KRLD from Dallas. In those days it was a little bit of an effort

to set up for that kind of a broadcast.

I remember sitting right down front with Walter because Walter was going to hold a stop-watch and indicate to Senator Johnson when his time was up. Of course, I'm sure others have related that Senator Johnson, when he stepped in the room that night, showed all of the signs of the old campaigner. He had his Texas hat and waved it at everyone. Then that was the first time, I believe, that he got off the story about his tailor--that he'd ordered a blue suit. I remember Mrs. Johnson cringed and blushed as he was telling the story; how he'd told the tailor to go on and make it; that even if he didn't live he could use it. I'd say the story went over good that night because he showed that he could joke about something that all of us had been so greatly concerned [about]. So I would say the Lake Whitney--even though I don't want to claim to be an important part of it, I think it's a very vital part in the life of Senator Johnson.

Now let's move on up to Los Angeles. My precinct was a bit different in 1960 than what it had been in 1956.

B: Excuse me, sir. Let me point out here, just for the benefit of anyone using this, by 1960 you're no longer a pastor of the Lakewood Baptist Church.

H: I'm with the Greater Dallas Council of Churches.

B: You're executive director--

H: Maybe I should say that I had been brought to that position because of involvement in community affairs. At that time also was when the question of integration was beginning. We had gone through the crisis at Little Rock, Arkansas. I had gone there, again out of

interest for the community, to find out what went wrong. Then that was the period when there was some violence in Clinton, Tennessee, and some in New Orleans. I visited those cities. It did not have any political connotations at all. In those days it was a little bit unusual for a Baptist pastor to show any interest in cooperation. In those days the word ecumenicity was a new word. Like I remember the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church said that if I would assume the responsibility, that it would take someone else perhaps five years to learn Dallas as well as I knew it. So by that time I was with the Council of Churches, but I continued--I do not want to imply in this interview that I was what you'd call a political-minded clergyman. I go back--that my whole interest was because of a great admiration for Walter Jenkins, and I was trying to translate an appreciation for him into deeds for one Lyndon B. Johnson.

In all of this--this would have been a little bit later. We go through the campaign of 1960, and I was exceedingly active in preparation of going to Los Angeles. I was not a delegate, but I did have--this is a rather interesting little human bit of history. I had become acquainted of course by that time with Cliff Carter. Things were not as strict I guess as they should have been. Cliff would go on the floor and send his badge out to me. Then I'd come in, and that was the way I got on the floor. I wasn't the only one. There were about twelve or fifteen--of course, there were certain staff members that had badges, like Cliff. Now, Walter was not on the floor too much. Walter was handling the operations from a cottage nearby, as I recall. But the real strategy was at the Biltmore Hotel.

I shared a suite with Robert L. Clark. The very interesting

thing is that that suite just happened to be adjacent to John F. Kennedy. And as we got right near the time, naturally the press --anybody who was there would know the corridors were just jammed. So whenever Kennedy would meet the press, they'd be so overflowing till I let my sense of fairness I guess get the best of me. I'd open the door of our suite and let them come in and make their telephone calls and do some of their writing. Of course they'd see all of our LBJ paraphernalia and literature in there. But we exchanged pleasantries. I spoke to Mr. Kennedy several times. Of course his brothers were coming in and out. As I recall, I don't believe he spent the night in the suite. He stayed out with his father, some distance from the hotel. But nevertheless that room was listed as his contact.

B: Did you help try to round up delegates for Mr. Johnson?

H: Oh yes. And it was so crowded you couldn't get elevators. We'd go up and down the fire escapes. Again, though, I was teamed up with Irving Goldberg. We would visit delegations and then I was present when they finally decided for--they almost called it a joint debate. It was when they got the Massachusetts delegation and the Texas delegation, and Mr. Johnson and Mr. Kennedy appeared together. Of course, the networks picked it up.

B: Who made the decision to go ahead and do that? Was Mr. Rayburn involved in it?

H: I would rather expect John Connally had more to do with that, because Connally was--you see, he had opened the headquarters here in Washington at the Ambassador. That was when Mr. Johnson got off the statement that "we have proven in West Virginia that a Protestant

state would go for a Roman Catholic. Now is the time to prove that a Roman Catholic state will support a Protestant." Now Governor Price Daniel was the one that introduced--

I remember that Mr. Kennedy came from this room, and I remember overhearing comments to him that "if you do not hurry and get to this dining room"--I forget which, Renaissance or whatever room it was in--"You're going to get clobbered." It seems the radio and press began playing it up as a joint debate, but in reality it was an appearance of two candidates before their respective state delegations. So I would think that maybe Mr. Kennedy's staff was a little bit slow in letting him know that Mr. Johnson was going on and speaking. Of course, any time you get Texas and Massachusetts in the same room, I think Texans could cheer a little louder, especially with the enthusiasm that we had for LBJ. So that was also the point when Mr. Johnson, in addition to mentioning the religious angle, mentioned Mr. Kennedy's absentee record in the Senate.

I would have to admit, just recalling standing there, that Mr. Kennedy scored pretty heavily by getting up and saying in the outset with all of his charm--he didn't in that time refer to him as the Majority Leader or senator, he'd say, "Why I admit what Lyndon has said; I have an absentee record, but the reason I have it is because he's doing such a good job as Majority Leader. Why should I be in Washington?" Kennedy of course just eulogized Johnson's competence, and played him up as a real--then of course the political pitch was that "we must keep him where he is."

It was one of those things where neither one could have had much--it was an extemporaneous and a challenge to the alertness of

both men. But I would say that each handled himself very well. But I would think at that stage that he realized what he knew from the beginning, that he was fighting an uphill battle, because he had not gone in any primaries. And he was enough of a political realist, he always had his antenna, that he was about like the baseball player striving for a home run, where Kennedy was using the strategy revealing confidence and a good deal of levity and humor.

Of course I remember on the floor that we helped to pass around little papers we'd mimeographed. "The tide is going to turn. Don't give way on the first ballot." So as an eager, overly enthusiastic, non-professional politician, when I got the word that Mr. Kennedy had won on the first ballot, that was life's darkest moment for me. I remember going back to the suite, Bob Clark just dropped across the bed--he was exhausted--and just didn't want to talk at all. I remember going over and getting on the phone. I got Jack Valenti's wife--Wiley?

B: Mary Margaret Wiley.

H: Got Mary Margaret Wiley on the line. And of course I guess that would have been right in the Johnson suite. So in a natural way I just told Mary Margaret, "I'm heartsick." Then I remember getting Walter on the line. I guess we were all mutually tired and hurt, disappointed.

Then the next day, I've forgotten when it was but I remember the name, it was the Renaissance Room where they announced that the Johnson family was coming. I remember that they all came in, and I believe it was Lynda who said, when they'd asked her if she had anything to say, "Daddy has always taught me that there'd be another ballgame. So we appreciate what you all have done." I would have

to say it was a rather emotional session. No matter how anybody tried to cheer us up we were still rather downcast. But I would say that there was something about the presence of both Senator and Mrs. Johnson --the more I think about it, it did not end on an emotional note. We each were shaking hands and going our way.

B: Had there been any bitterness built up between the Kennedy and Johnson forces in the heat of the campaign?

H: I don't much think so because, as I say, we knew he was winning in the primaries that he was going in. No more bitterness than you'd find--it was tough competition. I would say that. Then I would have to admit that there are certain sectional differences. The whole background of the two men was so different. I guess most of us identified, especially I did--I'm a product of the depression, and having been reared in a preacher's home--we've often said in order to know how successful the depression really was, you had to be reared in a minister's home. So I identified with that nature. But there certainly was no bitterness on Walter's part. I guess those that I was running shoulders with were more what you'd call "old pros." I'm sure there was some bitterness, but I didn't detect any personal animosities at all.

B: Had anybody been talking about the possibility of the vice presidential position?

H: No, I'd say that was the farthest thought from anybody's mind. When we left the Renaissance Room, we left to just hear the ceremonies. I remember having breakfast at the same table with Mr. Rayburn in the coffee shop there. I don't even remember it being mentioned. When it was mentioned, it moved very fast. I was in Senator Johnson's

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suite with Walter when he had gotten the word. And of course we had been through all that period--I knew Senator Robert Kerr because I had lived in Oklahoma at one time. Senator Kerr and Governor Daniel and Speaker Rayburn were in many a huddle in a matter of hours there.

B: Who was arguing for what? It's known that there was some debate about taking--

H: I think I would have to say because I don't want to be too dogmatic about it, because as I say I was an inexperienced on-looker, and I was so excited until--I would gather from facial expressions and things I overheard that nearly everyone was a bit cool about it. In other words, they first did not expect it. Then they went through a stage of "couldn't believe it." Then when they realized that it was a decision that he had to make, there was a great difficulty.

I had no position one way or another. I don't know that I've ever read anything, but I think Mr. Rayburn was not opposed to it, but he had certain conditions that he wanted. And as I recall, he did not want himself or he didn't want Senator Johnson to receive all the information from Senator Robert Kennedy. I don't know that there was any animosity, he felt like that John F. Kennedy should talk to one Lyndon B. Johnson and that the two men should have a thorough understanding, and it should not be done between emissaries. I think that was a good deal of the argument and debate that was going on.

I certainly want to be very cautious and careful. I don't much think there was ever any doubt in Senator Johnson's mind. I don't mean that he wanted the vice presidency. He loved what he had done

as Majority Leader, but I would analyze it--I'm not asking you to agree--but as a historian I think a person, whether it be in the realm of politics or athletics or whatever, they feel like they've reached their ultimate--they've carried it as far, not as it could go--but in other words I don't want to say he was ready to relinquish it, but I think that factor in it, that the vice presidency would give him another step and another challenge--

B: Some have said too that Mrs. Johnson may have been influential in the decision; that she may have wanted to see him slow down a little.

H: I would think that was a factor. She's such a marvelous person, and she's able to understand him perhaps better actually than anyone else. Even those who may have had some misgivings, they all had such a profound appreciation for her till in a room where things were tense--I remember another lady was in there. I don't recall how she got in there. But Mrs. Perle Mesta was in there, and I saw her actually walk over and reach and grab Senator Johnson's tie and say, "Lyndon, you've betrayed me. You've betrayed everything," and she'd jerk on it. I would start to reach over. It was not in a sense of attack, but just of showing the emotion of the thing.

I'm sure that Mrs. Johnson was of great help in that. I remember how she put her arm around her and said, "Oh, Perle, everything will be all right." So she kind of calmed [her down].

But Mrs. Mesta was pulling that tie and saying, "You've betrayed everything you've ever stood for."

This was all inside the suite. I remember Senator Johnson stepping out in the corridor of the hotel right by his door and standing in a chair. And of course the press were on their tiptoes,

everybody pushing one another, trying to get a little closer, trying to get pictures. That was when he said, "If my country thinks I can serve better as a private, I want to serve. If they want me to serve as a general, whatever my country." He recalled his war experience. Then he said, "Jack Kennedy has asked me to serve. I accept."

B: There were some of the Texas people who were still after that not quite reconciled to it, I believe, weren't there?

H: I would say that Texas--your being a historian, you have to go back to that period. Having my involvement in religion, I would have to say that there was still in 1960 a strong anti-Catholic feeling in Texas. The very fact that one of the leading businessmen in Dallas throughout that campaign bought radio time. He himself would come on the air I think every morning at 6:30; and anybody, if there be such as a tape of that, it would be difficult in this day and time to believe. And every kind of pamphlet--I remember there was some kind of printing outfit in Greenville, Texas, and one in Waco. The state was literally flooded with wild speculation. All the old stories of maybe there being a pope moving in the White House. I would say that all of the prejudices of 1928 were brought up to date with modern means of printing and radio and media in that 1960 campaign.

But it's rather interesting, though while Texas was the hotbed of it, that when Senator Kennedy came into Houston I think that will be recorded--his confrontation--I think that in the light of history will be kind of like a watershed, a turning point.

B: Could you tell if Lyndon Johnson's presence on the ticket in any way

mitigated anti-Catholicism among the people you knew of in your area?

That may be an impossible kind of thing to answer.

H: I think he stood so forthrightly and made attacks on religious prejudice. People can say that President Kennedy resolved the religious issue. He couldn't have done it without Senator Johnson because Senator Johnson spoke the language of that part of the country. When he'd stand up and say, "I'd rather go down in defeat, I'd rather suffer humiliation, than to see an election decided on this kind of issue." Then they played rather heavily on Kennedy's war record, and Johnson would tell how he watched him come back to the Capitol, and how he was practically yellow in appearance. Then he'd say that a man who was willing to give his life for his country. Both of them used the word "baptism" very much. You see, Texas is predominantly a Baptist state, and baptism was a word that most of them could identify with. "We must not let one's baptism decide. We must not deny him the right of office because of that."

B: Did you try through your position with the Greater Dallas Council of Churches to calm down some of the more virulent propaganda that was going on?

H: Oh, yes. I gave every kind of interview. I was at that time appearing in a different pulpit every Sunday. I was bringing ministers together. I do not want to take credit because whenever you have a momentous idea, no one person is responsible for it. But I was very enthusiastic about the Houston engagement. I offered to do it in Dallas, but we decided that Houston would be--at that time the president of the Southern Baptist Convention was serving in a church in Houston, the First Baptist Church in Houston. Also it came out that he had

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already been to Dallas. So this was done. You see, that was taped, and nearly every tape was worn out, not only in Texas but all across the South.

B: Do you know incidentally who thought of that idea in the first place, that is, the general idea of confrontation between Mr. Kennedy and the ministerial group?

H: Mr. Booth Mooney, who wrote a book entitled The Lyndon Johnson Story, and has another book coming out this year, acknowledges me as the one. That's what I qualified when I told you, and I've told Booth, that --every minister who was in the sound of his voice around there--But I asked Booth not to do it. He finally said, "I'll only withdraw it if you tell me that you just insist."

So I would have to say also at that time Walter in the early stages had introduced me--I'm trying to think of his name; President Kennedy later appointed him as an Ambassador to Chile--who was in the office here and they employed a man named Jim Wine. And Jim Wine had had a strong religious background, as I had had, so within a matter of months I read ten thousand letters approximately--not exaggeration--that had been cataloged and put in a file on the basis of religious prejudice. Now, they'd all been addressed mostly to Kennedy of course, 90-percent of them. So it was out of reading those letters--you can imagine your feeling--I guess all of us are human--when you read five letters and you read another ten--and some of them were just downright vicious. So I kept on saying something had to be done.

The way I got into it, the man who was heading the campaign in Texas was named Gerald Mann. Gerald Mann had gone through school at

Yale as a lay congregational--he'd been a student pastor, what I might say. But he was a highly dedicated Methodist layman. He'd been a well-known football player at SMU. So he was conversant. What I'm trying to say, unless you were conversant, unless you understood a congregation of, say, four hundred people--what I'm talking about if you could understand it across the state--so I just kept on telling Gerald Mann something had to be done.

So I would say that the way I think Booth is going to evolve it is not so much I deserve the credit, but it was the fact that Mann was so conversant, and then that my total involvement in religion at that time--I would say this to you though, I was also bringing around me all the time pastors where I was saying, "This is the time when you've got to separate the men from the boys." One of the things that Booth is going to put in his book is the morning after the confrontation in Houston, the Roman Catholic bishop in Dallas, who was a good friend of mine, was entering his office, and a priest comes rushing up to him and knelt and kissed the ring and said, "What did you think about the speech last night?" And the bishop said, "A damned good Protestant," talking about--. So as you know, Mr. Kennedy went all out. I don't mean in compromising, but in clarity and in simplifying it, so as to almost say, "Now, is this what you want?"

Another thing, and I'm taking too much of your time, I ought to mention one other thing. I was involved in the famous luncheon visit to Dallas.

B: I had down to ask you about that.

H: Just before the election. Was that on a Friday or a Saturday?

B: I don't know.

H: It was near the end of a week, because that's a point I want to make. I was actually in the lobby of the Adolphus, and it was rough. No newspaper account could quite adequately describe the--I really feared that someone was just going to get their body crushed.

B: Were the people there, the protesters, well dressed, middle-class, and upper middle-class types as they were described?

H: Some of them were "Junior Leaguers," that would be your upper bracket. And at that time there was a highly articulate congressman named Bruce Alger, and he had assembled them as early as 9 and 10 o'clock in the morning. I'd seen them on the street. He just frankly, with all due respect, got beside himself. He became like a leader of a mob. That was the time of course when Mrs. Johnson had to be excused, said she wanted to go to a beauty parlor, but she was in a state of shock almost.

B: You mean after she had walked out through the crowd?

H: Yes. She did not come into the luncheon, as I recall, because she had been ruffled up so--her hair and all. And she did go to a beauty parlor there in the hotel that day.

But here's what I want to say, again understanding Texas. Every county seat newspaper carried nearly a front page editorial on that Sunday. On Sundays in Texas church people get up a little earlier, especially in rural areas. They read those editorials, and then went to Sunday School and church, and I think that's when a vast segment crystallized that "we don't like that. Now we may not care for Jack Kennedy; we may not care for Lyndon Johnson, but this is contrary--". It was something that I think rises in American people, especially in a Texan, that they felt like their own state was--some

of the editorials were headed "A Disgraceful Act." So the thing that I think somebody ought to note in all this is the fact that it occurred near the end of the week, and the election, as I recall, was to be on Tuesday. So I think that Texas, especially at that time--people across the country wouldn't understand what I mean, but it was predominantly a Sunday School state. It's not unusual in Texas for churches to have a larger enrollment in their Sunday School than in their church. So what I'm getting at, the Sunday School affords more of an opportunity to talk and for exchange of ideas, and so it's a group dynamic, you might say, a happening. I really think that was very, very significant.

I don't know what to say now about the religious question. I think that disturbance at the luncheon overshadowed. And I think Senator Johnson's ability to really rise to a height as a result of--you see, that was when he said, "If the day has come when I can't walk into a hotel with my lady"--and the way he said "my lady" he touched the heart of every--he appealed to decency--. So he did not overdo it, but he just responded, and it couldn't have been premeditated. It's a part of Lyndon Johnson.

B: Did anyone try to break up that crowd before?

H: Oh, yes. Bob Clark was in there. I was in there. People were lifting their hands and saying, "Please, please stop!" Somebody would say, "There's a lady over here. She's going to be hurt." But I don't want to say that it was the Junior League. I'm saying that women of the Junior League-type were on the streets prior to it. Then it was just one of those things that got out of hand in an awful big hurry.

B: What happened to that group after the Johnsons went through? Did

they break up then?

H: Dispersed. I don't think they fully realized. But then after they got home, began hearing about it on radio, and then began seeing these editorials, you could hardly find any body who would acknowledge being a part of it. It was something that nobody ever quite knew how to use in future campaigns against that congressman. They had clips of it. But it was one of those things--I think that after a disgraceful act that people, those who were a part of it, wanted to erase it. It was little discussed from then on.

Let me try to see how we can wrap this up now. Let me say, during the Kennedy administration, was of course when Mr. Johnson as Vice President was in charge of equal employment--

B: I suspect you've got a lot more to tell, and we don't have to do it all at once. If you don't mind, I can come back.

H: If you think it's of any interest. I've got some things that I want to say about Walter Jenkins, I would like to come to the tragedy, I would like to give you my--I would really appreciate if you would.

B: I think you should, sir. As a matter of fact, this is superb material. It's this kind of detailed and intimate and personal account that makes this kind of project most valuable. And I think if you have the time--

H: Oh, I'm eager, which I told Joe, I'm willing--

B: I think you should go through it in as much detail as you can. And I can come back.

H: Well, let's just do that.

B: Would you like to close up today?

H: Let me just tell you other things that I need to mention--how they

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appointed me Chairman of the Texas Advisory Committee on Civil Rights, how that was kind of a forerunner to this. I need to tell you about my appointment. It's rather interesting that we'd be doing this today when you don't know that yesterday President Nixon reappointed me.

B: Congratulations.

H: I mean, it's uncanny that I'd be talking to you when I'm to continue as vice chairman for a five year appointment. It kind of came as a surprise.

B: That's excellent.

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By Luther Holcomb

to the

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