

## INTERVIEW I

DATE: June 6, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM J. HOPKINS

INTERVIEWER: THOMAS H. BAKER

PLACE: National Archives Conference Room, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

B: Sir, I know that you came to the White House in 1931, in October I believe, and have been there since. Could you summarize your career within the White House: where you started and where you have come to?

H: As you say, I came to the White House in October of 1931. I had been working in the Bureau of Naturalization, having come to Washington in 1929 on the basis of a civil service examination. At that time, the Bureau of Naturalization and the Department of Labor had an employee on detail at the White House. That young man left and the bureau was asked to supply a replacement and I happened to be it. I came over to the White House and was assigned to the correspondence section.

Just as a matter of interest, I had been there about a week and the executive clerk, who was the junior executive clerk at that time--in fact the man I subsequently replaced as executive clerk--dropped by my desk, dropped a newspaper on my desk, said, "You might like to read this." It developed it was my home town county paper. He had been born and raised about ten miles from where I had and of course I had never known him until that time.

I was in the correspondence section from that time in 1931 until 1943. In the interim, I had become assistant chief of correspondence

Hopkins -- I -- 2

and had on many occasions filled in downstairs for one of the executive clerks. Mr. Rudolph Foster was the senior executive clerk. Maurice Latta, whom we called Judge Latta, was the junior executive clerk. When one of those was away, I filled in many times. Rudolph Foster died in 1943. Mr. Latta was elevated to his position, and I was sent down to sit opposite Mr. Latta and serve as the junior executive clerk. I occupied that position as executive clerk until President Johnson very graciously changed the title to executive assistant. That was back in 1966. The duties remained relatively the same. I have been in the relative same position since 1948; that was when Mr. Latta passed away, early in that year, and I was elevated to the senior executive clerkship by President Truman in-- I'm guessing now--probably May or June of 1948.

B: As the duties evolved, by the time of the Johnson years, what did the position of the executive clerk consist of?

H: Basically, I would say it was to assist in providing for the orderly handling of documents and correspondence within the White House office, and also assist in the organization and supervision of the clerical services and procedures. This is not a policy position. We, all of us in what we call the operating units, the career service, are there to serve the president and the members of his staff loyally and to the best of our ability. It is not a policy-making position. Basically, we work with the top level presidential staff. As the years go on and as the office tends to increase in size and complexity, our contacts with the president himself are fewer and fewer as each administration

Hopkins -- I -- 3

goes on. In other words, back in President Truman's day we had a great deal of contact with the President. The trend since then has been to deal more and more with the presidential staff.

B: You have a fairly large staff yourself, don't you?

H: We have what is known as the operating units. In other words, the continuing group, the carry-over group from administration to administration, which consists basically of a file room, a mail room, a correspondence section, telegraph and transportation services, a telephone room, an administrative office, a messenger and duplicating section. As I say, that is the carry-over group ordinarily and it would comprise, roughly speaking, I would say sixty per cent of the office numbers-wise.

B: I think probably most people don't realize that the White House has this large, permanent career unit there that stays as presidents come and go.

H: Yes, many of them stay a good long time. For instance, I have been there since President Hoover's time. There is a lady that works over in our file room now that antedates me by a couple of years. When I first came to the White House in President Hoover's time, there were a number of people there that went back to President McKinley's time and Theodore Roosevelt's time. Within the last few years a man who is dead now and retired I believe early in President Kennedy's time went back to the Wilson Administration. So there is a great deal of continuity.

B: Do your duties involve anything pertaining to the mansion itself, the

Hopkins -- I -- 4

housekeeping, and so on?

H: No.

B: That is a separate [thing].

H: That's entirely separate. The counterpart, as far as the mansion is concerned, to my job is the chief usher.

B: Do you develop a kind of proprietary air about the White House?

H: No, I would say not. You never get over the great respect for it and the humility, as I would refer to it, as you come in to work each day, but I don't know as you develop a proprietary air. You have a feeling that you are working for the president and his staff, and I think if you would develop too much of a proprietary air, you probably wouldn't be there as long as some of us have.

B: I assume that also applies to politics. I assume you would conscientiously avoid that kind of thing.

H: You lean over backwards to avoid that.

B: Do you have sole authority in hiring and firing within your area?

H: No, I would say not.

B: How does it work?

H: Well, customarily a great many of the people in the operating units come to the White House in the first instance on detail from the departments and agencies. In fact, the great percentage of them do.

B: This is one of the ways the White House keeps its financial expenses down, I believe. Isn't it?

H: To some extent. We have a detail program that is provided for by statute. But [for] a number of the people who come on detail, it

Hopkins -- I -- 5

has several advantages. Some of them like to remain on detail. In other words, they don't have the problems possibly in the change of an administration. If they do want to come on to the White House rolls as vacancies occur and if it's the type of person we want to bring on, then we recommend to the proper people that they give consideration to bring them on the White House rolls. Most of them in the operating units came that way in the first place.

B: Who would be the proper people? The president and his staff?

H: Ordinarily one of the presidential staff is the man we look to for administrative guidance. It varies from administration to administration. There have been occasions in the past, for instance back in President Truman's time, when we used to sign the appointment papers. In President Eisenhower's time, the personnel man did that. In President Johnson's time, they were customarily made for the man who occupied the position of appointment secretary.

B: Who would that have been?

H: Mr. [Marvin] Watson and Jim Jones succeeding Mr. Watson.

Ordinarily, in the staff, in the operating units they will take our recommendation. We try to follow a pattern of not making a recommendation to them unless we feel it is to the benefit of the office and the administration.

B: One would think that you pretty well would have your pick of the best employees with the prestige of the location.

H: Well, that is true to a certain extent, but there are other reasons why sometimes you don't. Many people in this day and age don't like

Hopkins -- I -- 6

to work overtime. That's the way of life at the White House. Many people--I am talking now about clerical help, stenographers, clerks, typists and that sort of thing--are working out in one of the departments. They have a nice parking arrangement. They come over to the White House. "What can you offer us in the way of parking?" "We can't offer you anything." "How about working conditions, working hours?" "Well, you may have to work on Saturday. We may have to call you in at night. We may have to call you in on Sunday." Some people, that just doesn't appeal to them.

B: To move to Mr. Johnson specifically. What was it like in your office at the time of President Kennedy's assassination and Mr. Johnson's accession to the presidency?

H: Of course, that is something you are never prepared for. At that time our office was down on the main floor, essentially one office removed from the president's immediate office. That is where the executive clerk's spot had been ever since the West Wing had been rebuilt in 1934. We got word that the President had been shot, of course, around early afternoon. We didn't get real word of the seriousness of it until I would say an hour or so later.

There was a group that assembled over in the East Wing. Later, one of Mr. Johnson's chief assistants, Walter Jenkins, who had not been with the party and had had an office over in the Executive Office Building, came over there. Of course, early in the afternoon what really happened was made known. Well, there were many problems, of course. It is sort of a situation: "The king is dead. Long live

Hopkins -- I -- 7

the king." Telegrams and messages began pouring in from all over the world.

When Mr. Johnson did not occupy the White House immediately--it was a matter of a few days--he used his office over across the street in the Executive Office Building, and I think was very generous and considerate of the previous administration in that regard. It took a little time to get the mementoes and that sort of thing from President Kennedy's immediate office. There was a temporary office set up across in the Executive Office Building, so Mr. Johnson operated from the EOB for, I would say, probably until after the funeral was over. I am not sure of that; that's my recollection.

Of course, in the White House itself, much of the activity in those first few days was by the Kennedy staff making the arrangements for the funeral. They sort of had a command post there. Ralph Dungan was the man there. Sargent Shriver and others were basically in charge, but much of the actual operation of it came from Ralph Dungan's office. There was a great deal of activity in the matter of proclamation by the President of the death of the former President and, of course, the great many foreign heads of state and heads of government coming to the funeral.

Of course, a situation like that, as far as the daily operation of the office is concerned, is not as drastic from a standpoint of our operating groups as a change of administration. Although you are prepared for a change of administration, you don't have the complete turnover. In other words, you had a great number of the Kennedy staff

Hopkins -- I -- 8

still there commingling with the staff Mr. Johnson had, so it doesn't throw everything out of routine as a change of administration does. It is a gradual process whereas a change of administration is overnight.

B: Did the overlapping staffs get along pretty well--the Kennedy people and the Johnson people?

H: From my observation, I would say they did. We read lots of things in the paper to the extent that there was a lot of conflict and I am sure there was in certain areas. But as far as the daily operation of the office, I wouldn't say it was evident to us at least.

B: Actually this is the second similar thing in your experience. [There was also] the death of Franklin Roosevelt and the accession of Mr. Truman.

H: Yes. One difference as far as the office operation was concerned was the way the files were handled. On President Roosevelt's death, the files were all cleaned out and were out of the White House in a matter of forty-eight hours. They were boxed up in big packing boxes from the Treasury Department, as I recall, and sent down to the [National] Archives. With the death of President Kennedy, there was an understanding that President Kennedy's files would be kept at the White House for a while, so they would be available to the new administration. On instructions from Mr. Bundy, as I recall, we made arrangements so there would be an entire cleavage; in other words, there would be no commingling. You would still have President Kennedy's files there and you would start a new file for President Johnson. The Kennedy files were there for several months. So they were helpful.



Hopkins -- I -- 9

Then they [were] moved out to archives.

B: I would assume that the Johnson people had to make use of them for continuing things and so on.

H: Yes, every effort was made so they would not be commingled because it is a custom and tradition that the files of each president belong to him. At each change of administration, the files of the president are subject to his disposition and leave the White House just as President Johnson's were taken on to Texas at the end of his administration. That's been going on, of course, ever since the time of George Washington.

B: Yes. Who answered the mail you got at the time of the assassination? Did that stay within your office and was it answered through your standard channels? Or did it go to the Kennedy family to be answered?

H: That would depend on who it was addressed to. If it was addressed to Mrs. Kennedy as much of it was--[it] came in by the hundreds of thousands--they had volunteers and others to help. It was received at the White House, but it was channeled to those who were working for Mrs. Kennedy. Of course, hundreds of thousands also came in to President Johnson. That was handled at the White House. So it all depended on who it was addressed to as to who handled it.

B: Had you known Mr. Johnson while he was vice president? Had you had any contact with him?

H: Not personally. I had seen him in and out of the office, but I didn't know him personally, no.

B: Do you recall when you first saw him as president, as your new boss,

Hopkins -- I -- 10

to see and talk to about it?

H: Yes. In a matter of the first few days. Walter Jenkins who was the man we looked to for guidance in matters of administration, personnel and other areas of various kinds, had his office in the area that had been vacated by Mr. Dungan and many times used the office that we were in at that time as a passageway into the President's office. I don't recall exactly the first time, but it was within the matter of the first few days, of course.

B: Did Mr. Johnson's files from his career before then come to your office then?

H: No. Some of them were available in the Executive Office Building. They were under the jurisdiction I would say of the lady who worked under Mrs. [Juanita] Robert's direction, Dorothy Territo.

B: That's what I was unsure about--the relationship between you and Mrs. Territo.

H: They were available, if there was need for them, and for a while at least, some of them were in an extra room we had down in the basement area of the Executive Office Building. They were not commingled or anything with the President's files. In other words, that's a practice that's gone on in each administration. Anything that happens before the incumbent becomes president does not commingle with his presidential files.

B: Was there any change in your filing procedures with Mr. Johnson's accession to suit his particular needs?

H: Well, I would say not. No. We have a basic file manual that is

Hopkins -- I -- 11

adopted for the purpose of the White House office. It was based on a study made by some experts here in archives late in the Eisenhower Administration. [It was] first used with the incoming Kennedy Administration. So basically the system was the same and is the same today. Now, in certain areas, Mrs. Territo might for various reasons want to keep a particular file that maybe previously we would have kept in central files, but there again she worked very closely with our chief of central files, Mr. Matthews. So it was no problem and substantially the system is the same.

B: I assume, since future scholars will be using this, that the Johnson Library will have a copy of your manual, your file guide.

H: I'm sure they will. Yes.

B: Did I understand that the telephone operators were under your general supervision?

H: Yes.

B: One of the things that Mr. Johnson is most known for is the use of the telephone. Did it really increase significantly during his administration?

H: Yes, I would say it did, I would say it did. And he was insistent on good service. We always felt that we had the best telephone switchboard in town, and the operators over the years have developed a reputation for being able to find anybody anyplace whether they are out on a boat or in the middle of the ocean or in the air or whatnot. We added to the strength of the telephone board, in other words, the number of people on it, and also during that time installed a new

Hopkins -- I -- 12

switchboard. It is the new Centrex System. The telephone people say it is the latest and the best thing there is. That was done under Mr. Watson's direction and guidance and is so developed that you have people that are there and their main job is to service the President. I hope we service him to his satisfaction. There were occasions when something would go wrong, but I think that, relatively speaking, they were satisfied.

B: I have heard a good deal of high praise for the telephone operators. Everybody that works in the White House sooner or later finds occasion to mention it.

H: Well, they give us secretarial service that I don't think that you get anyplace else in town.

B: Did Mr. Johnson ever make any demands on them they couldn't answer?

H: No, I don't think so. The main problems that would develop sometimes would be maybe some odd noise on the line or something like that that was occasionally the fault of the operator but more often was the fault of the equipment and a matter of the telephone company trying to work out the bugs.

They liked the girls on the board to the extent in the last few years they developed a practice of taking some of them along when the President was in Texas, so they could have familiar voices and that sort of thing on the boards there rather than using the operators from the signal board. Of course, the operators from the signal board were men under the military system. They rotate quite often and they didn't have the background and the knowledge that the operators on

Hopkins -- I -- 13

what we call the White House board do. They seemed to like them better.

B: Were the trips to Texas sort of passed around as a sort of reward?

H: To a certain extent. Of course, there again they tried to the extent possible to send the best operators because they weren't covered as heavy as they were here and they wanted to provide the President good service.

B: When a crisis situation arose were you notified and therefore would bring on extra operators?

H: Yes, that was always done. They are occasions though even with this new system when a crisis situation is pretty hard to handle. If you are not careful a situation develops where many people from the general public call in and unless there is someplace that the operator can refer these people, they take up too much of the operator's time. In other words, they just want to get something off of their chest. So we had to occasionally make special arrangements--if it was an international situation, make arrangements with the NSC people so they would have several people standing by at phones to which operators could refer them. In other words, not to tie too many of the lines up while the operators were listening to what the caller had to say to the extent of letting the calls pile up.

B: The NSC would be the National Security Council in the White House?

H: Yes, that is just an example. There are other occasions when they had to divert them some other way.

B: Do the White House operators listen to every call?

Hopkins -- I -- 14

H: You mean--

B: You mentioned ordinary citizens who call up to get something off of their chest and I assume a good many just plain cranks.

H: Well, yes. Now of course, if they are cranks and the operator makes a decision that this is a crank, they try not to ever hang up on anybody. They will say, "Well, I will refer you to one of the President's assistants." It may be that the man on the other end of the line is a Secret Service agent. Lots of these crank calls come in during the night.

B: To clarify that you mean when the operator says, "I will give you to a President's assistant," what she does is turn him over to a Secret Service agent.

H: Yes. He is a trained man and he will be able to make a determination as to whether this is something we should just listen to and forget or something we should follow up on and that type of thing.

B: I would imagine a lot of people call up in effect just to say hello.

H: I think they do. The operators many times are able to satisfy those. Also it has been the practice over the years [since] many times they want to call up and talk to somebody [that] there is usually an office [to handle this]. For the last few years, I think it still is [true] that a couple of the girls that work under the appointment secretary's office take many of those calls. Some of them require relaying information to somebody; others are just a matter of being pleasant and that sort of thing.

B: I guess you get a lot of them that really ought to be in one of the departments.

Hopkins -- I -- 15

H: Yes, and if that is the nature, to the extent they can, the operators refer them to the department. But of course sometimes the caller doesn't want to talk to somebody in the department; they want to talk to somebody at the White House. In situations like Vietnam or like Korea, many times you have families calling in and that sort of thing. Customarily the best place to refer those is to the office of the armed forces aide who has ready access to the right offices in the Department of Defense and can there again make a determination as to whether something should be done or not.

B: Do any calls like that ever go to Mr. Johnson? Would he ever say, "I would like to hear every once in a while just a random citizen"?

H: I don't know as I can answer that. I don't think I can.

B: I suppose only the operators could.

H: Yes. I think any calls of that nature would necessarily go in the first instance probably through his private secretary and she might determine whether it was something he might want to do.

B: Your office also handles the mail, I believe, the volume of mail that comes into the White House. I would guess that since you have been in the White House the volume of mail has increased steadily through all of the several administrations.

H: Well, it has. No doubt about that. When I first came there in the Hoover days, it was relatively light. I would say maybe four or five hundred letters a day, something like that. There have been a number of books written that raised the figure way beyond that, but I don't think they are too factual. Then I would say that the mail

Hopkins -- I -- 16

was relatively static from President Roosevelt's Administration when it jumped up tremendously with the Great Depression of course through President Eisenhower's Administration. You had your peaks and your valleys, but roughly it stayed probably on an average of, year in and year out, three thousand a day or something like that. Of course, there were occasions, for instance, just as an example the MacArthur incident during President Truman's time, when you got maybe seventy-five thousand pieces in a matter of two or three days. But this average I would say would be something in the neighborhood of three thousand or so. When President Kennedy came in, it jumped up something in the neighborhood of two and one half times, and it has pretty much stayed that way ever since. In President Johnson's time, after his announcement in March, it tended to drop off some. Of course, in the last few months of his administration, it picked up again as it normally does when there is lots of good will mail coming in. I think we sort of anticipated that because that has been the history of it in past administrations. But I would say by and large it has been pretty static ever since the beginning of the Kennedy Administration. The two tremendous increases came in the Roosevelt and Kennedy Administrations and continued on in the successor administrations.

B: That's interesting. I assume within that it varies a good deal by events.

H: Oh, yes, current events have a great impact on it.

B: What have been, within the Johnson years, if you can remember, the major events that had provoked mail?



Hopkins -- I -- 17

H: Of course, over a great period of time [there] was the Vietnam mail; that is very heavy. Any kind of an instance--the situation in the Middle East one time evoked a great deal of mail in a short time. Sometimes if you have a major vacancy in office, just as an example, if the chief justiceship is vacant for a time, that can evoke a great volume of mail.

B: People offering suggestions?

H: Yes, offering suggestions. And it's a funny thing. It has been my observation over a period of time that you may get a great volume of mail, pros and cons, but you don't get a great many expressions of appreciation if the President goes the way they ask him to. In other words, that's it.

B: That's just human nature, I guess. These letters are all opened in your office to determine [their content]?

H: Well, they are opened in our mail room. In other words, there again a new administration comes in; we try to tell the proper members of the staff what the past practice has been. Substantially, it is that all mail addressed to the president is opened unless we are told that particular types he wants to come through, either to him or to particular members of his staff, unopened. That might be letters from members of his family or people that he carries on a personal correspondence with. We would customarily get such a list from his private secretary. But customarily, and that was the practice in the Johnson Administration, it would be opened in the mailroom. Mail addressed to particular members of the staff

Hopkins -- I -- 18

customarily goes to their office unopened unless we are told to the contrary. Mail addressed to either the first lady or to the president and first lady jointly goes to the social correspondence office and there again goes there unopened unless we are told to the contrary. There have been occasions, for instance at Christmas time, that a great percentage of the Christmas greetings would come addressed not to the president or the first lady but to both of them. So just to be helpful, arrangements are usually made then that they open all that type of mail before it goes over to the social correspondence. So there are occasions when it varies somewhat.

B: Did Mr. Johnson leave instructions with you that he would like to see just a random sampling of the mail?

H: Yes, there were occasions when that was done. Yes.

B: What kind of occasion?

H: Well, he had great interest in his mail. Very great interest. He was a little different from some of his predecessors. He was very insistent that it be handled promptly and adequately. He felt that, and we had instructions many times which were pretty hard to live up to, I must admit, that they should be in and out of the White House in forty-eight hours.

B: Forty-eight hours?

H: Yes.

B: And your office did much of the answering of just form mail?

H: Our correspondence section, yes. Of course, a great percentage was

Hopkins -- I -- 19

also referred out to the appropriate departments and agencies without acknowledgement at the White House but with instructions to the departments to acknowledge. There were numerous memoranda, several government-wide meetings conveying to the proper people in the departments and agencies the President's specific instructions about the timeliness of response to his mail.

B: Did you make it all the time?

H: I can't honestly say we did. We made an honest effort.

V: You would think that with some event that would provoke a great volume of mail, it would just be almost literally impossible.

H: Yes. Well, as a practical matter, that was it. But I am sure that everybody made an honest effort to move it just as promptly as they could.

B: What about crank letters or threatening letters? Are they automatically sent to the Secret Service?

H: They are customarily weeded out in the mail room and sent to the Secret Service. The mail room keeps a card index so if they have one that they are in doubt about, they can look on that. Of course, if it is a new one that isn't on the card index and the text is such that they think the Secret Service should look at it, it goes there.

B: The card index is a list of names of people who have in the past. . .?

H: Have a Secret Service file, yes. And sometimes that particular letter sounds perfectly all right, but it may be that this index is such that everything that comes in from this particular person Secret Service wants to see.

Hopkins -- I -- 20

B: Has that index gotten larger since the assassination of President Kennedy?

H: I would say it probably has. Of course, there are times when it is reduced, too. Every once in a while the Secret Service will say, "We no longer wish to see mail from this particular person." Then you handle it on an ad hoc case-by-case basis, in other words, the merits of the individual letter.

B: I phrased the question that way because I believe one of the criticisms of the Warren Report was that there needed to be more of this kind of continuing screening if possible.

H: Well, I am sure that the Secret Service approach to this and their abilities are much more sophisticated now than they were at that time.

B: You know someone once told me that at least crank telephone calls that the White House receives vary by the phases of the moon. Is that correct?

H: I am sure that a lot of people believe that and there may be something to it.

B: Incidentally, for the benefit of scholars in the future, are all letters received in the White House kept on file?

H: Yes. We make an effort. There is no such system. I am not saying that possibly in a few instances a staff member might not do it, but in our operating groups a record is kept of every one of them. In other words, it is either filed, or acknowledged and filed, or referred to the appropriate department and agency. It isn't thrown in the waste basket.

Hopkins -- I -- 21

B: You also keep something like a statistical chart of the volume mail at any given time and its subject material.

H: Our mail room keeps a record of that type, yes.

B: And this, I would assume, would have gone to the Johnson Library with Mr. Johnson's papers?

H: I am sure Dorothy Territo has them.

B: I can envision some poor future scholar, say, writing a Ph.D. dissertation on presidential mail having to plow through the mail. Mr. Johnson is also known to have been historically conscious in the sense that he was aware of the fact that history will make the ultimate judgment on his administration. Did this affect your file-keeping operations? Was he more insistent than other presidents on extensive and accurate filing?

H: I think that probably was reflected in some respects by the operation of Mrs. Territo's office working under the direction of Mrs. Roberts. That office was in existence from the first day of President Johnson's incumbency. That was new in my experience at the White House. There have been several administrations that something of the same general nature was developed sometime after the President came into office, but Mrs. Territo was there from the first day. Many of the things that were done under her direction, either in her file room or things that were kept and the nature of the breakdown and that sort of thing, was keeping in mind that eventually you would have a Johnson Library.

That type of thing, of course, didn't get started in President

Hopkins -- I -- 22

Roosevelt's time until--I am speaking from memory again now--I would say about 1939 or something like that, 1938 possibly. Of course he has the first library. The Eisenhower Administration was conscious of it. They did not have anybody quite analogous to the operation of Mrs. Territo. They did do some things that they didn't do in the Johnson Administration. It was more a matter of approach under the staff secretariat system. They probably kept more complete notes in certain areas than they did in the Johnson era, but there again each president operates in his own way.

B: Did Mrs. Territo's office or your operation handle such things as the photographs Mr. Okamoto took? - The movie films?

H: That was Mrs. Territo.

B: She handled all of them and it didn't get involved in your work.

H: No, not in the record part of it. Our file room got involved in those that were sent out, keeping a record of who got them, but the basic file of the photographs and that sort of thing for archival purposes was with Mrs. Territo.

B: What happens to the correspondence of a White House assistant, say the special counsel or one of the administrative assistants?

H: Theoretically it is part of the President's files and I would say actually in most instances that is true. Now I do know that President Johnson had very strong feelings in that regard, that in effect a staff member walks in with his hat on and should walk out with his hat on. And that's it. Everything belongs to the President. I am sure that some staff members, not only under President Johnson, but

Hopkins -- I -- 23

under other presidents have felt to the contrary. Some of them I am sure will leave everything; others I am sure take some things with an idea of writing. There was in the latter Johnson days an understanding, as I understand it, worked out somewhat by Mr. Murphy who was one of the President's assistants in the last few months.

B: You mean Charles Murphy who helped with the transition?

H: Yes, he helped with the transition. [This arrangement was that] all of these papers were presidential papers and should go with the President's files, but they [the assistants] were authorized to keep copies of certain things and it was understood that anything they turned over to the Johnson Library would of course be available to them. Now as a practical matter, there again I am sure that some staff members honored that fully and I am sure that some others didn't.

B: Was there thought at the transition of leaving the Johnson records all or in part for a while for the new administration?

H: Not that I know of. It would have been contrary to any past practice to have done so.

B: It would have been unprecedented.

H: Yes. President Taft in a little book he wrote made reference to that whole subject. In other words, why the papers have to be considered, as they are, the property of the president. The point he made is you can't separate the personal from the official. Of course, when a new administration comes in, they can't understand why the papers of cases and ongoing work that is halfway completed isn't available to them.

Hopkins -- I -- 24

Well, on the other hand, they can always understand it at the end of an administration. That's human nature again and you can understand why. There is always a feeling, particularly in a change in the administration, that there may be things in the files that would be used to the outgoing administration's disadvantage or misinterpreted and that sort of thing. I am sure that in most instances that there is no such thing. On the other hand, an incoming administration can get practically anything they need that way in the way of background papers, not interoffice White House papers but background papers from the departments and agencies, because [with] most of the material the basic background is something that has come to the White House from the departments and agencies anyway. The staff work on it in the White House is another matter. That is the type of thing, of course, that the President takes with him and there again you can't separate the personal from the official. So by custom and tradition, he takes everything.

B: Did you ever find yourself kind of caught in the middle on a question of ethics with the new administration coming to you saying, "What on earth did our predecessors do about this?"

H: I wouldn't say so. They ask many questions of that type, but most of them are the type of questions that are not a matter of ethics. In other words, it is straightforward. It is not an effort to discredit the previous administration or anything. It is just a matter of seeking information as to how to proceed.

B: Involving procedure rather than substance and that kind of thing.

H: Yes.



Hopkins -- I -- 25

You mentioned that you bend over backwards to avoid politics. I would guess that possibly administrations bend over backwards to avoid involving you in politics.

H: I would say they do. There have been occasions, just as an example-- and this didn't occur in President Johnson's time, but I am sure if the same situation had occurred it would have resulted the same way-- the matter of invitations to dinners by the [Democratic] National Committee. There was one occasion I recall when a great many members of the operating units received these letters, so I just went to the appropriate member of the staff, the man who was then serving as appointment secretary and told him quite frankly, "Now, these people don't know what to do. They are all civil service. It is not a matter of not wanting to go to the dinner maybe, but if they do go and get on a list, it is just one of those things." Without any hesitation he said, "You just tell them to forget it." And I would say that has been the attitude of all the people we have worked with, regardless of the administration or regardless of party. They have been very fair and understanding as far as the continuing group is concerned. And I think it works to their advantage because unless they did that you might not have the continuity you do have and the continuity they do have, in my opinion at least, is very useful for the first six months anyway. Without that, I think it would be quite a problem in the White House.

B: [Did] Mr. Johnson ever just wander into your office or one of your sections just to see what people were doing?

Hopkins -- I -- 26

H: He did when we were downstairs. Now we moved upstairs, I guess shortly after his election. It was early in 1965. He may have been up there a time or two, but he wandered around on the main floor quite a bit.

Of course, before he left office, he made an effort to get around to most of the operating units and make a little talk to the people and have his picture taken and all that sort of thing.

B: Did he know people by name? Obviously, he would know you by name.

H: Yes.

B: But down at the lower levels, did he?

H: He knew a number by name, yes. He treated the telephone operators, for instance, on a personal basis. He got so he knew the voices and all that sort of thing. So he was very personal that way and made an effort to make you feel at ease.

B: The converse of that would be, I guess, were there ever any occasions when something in your operation would anger Mr. Johnson and would you hear from him personally about it?

H: No, I don't think so. I would say that anything that did go wrong that way, we probably got it secondhand, probably through the man again who was in the outer office, Mr. Watson or somebody like that. There were occasions like that and you can expect those and hope they will stay at a minimum.

B: How was Mr. Watson to get along with?

H: Fine, as far as I am concerned. Fine. I like Mr. Watson very much.

B: And then after him, Mr. Jim Jones immediately. Jack Valenti didn't--?

Hopkins -- I -- 27

H: Jack Valenti preceded Mr. Watson.

B: Oh, yes.

H: And Mr. Valenti wasn't there as long. But I got along fine with Mr. Watson. He was fair and I think he was there to serve the President. Maybe some of staff thought he was a little tight in the use of government money, but I am all in favor of that myself, so I thought Mr. Watson did all right.

B: Were the automobiles under your jurisdiction?

H: No.

B: Probably just as well. I understand that gets to be a fairly bitter status symbol around there.

H: That is a problem. Years ago they used to be under the chief usher. They are now under the armed forces aide, but there again the armed forces aide in a situation like this with the cars would take instructions, if need be, from Mr. Watson or a man in his position.

B: Did your staff, your people, get invited to any social occasions at the White House or the ceremonies?

H: Oh, yes.

B: Was this unique to the Johnson Administration or was this [customary]?

H: No, I wouldn't say it was unique. It may have been extended a little more at times in his administration than others, but it had been done before. That is one problem--I am not talking about social functions basically over at the [White] House now, but many times, swearing-in ceremonies, that sort of thing in the Rose Garden. You don't have to go back very many years to when most of the White

Hopkins -- I -- 28

House office was in the West Wing. Now a great percentage of it or at least operating units are in the Executive Office Building. And there is a tendency to feel over there that you are more or less forgotten. So if they get an invitation to come over and see Mr. So and So's swearing-in or the arrival of a certain head of state or that type of thing, it is a morale booster, particularly for the younger people who haven't been at the White House too long and who have not had that type of thing. There were numerous occasions when something like that happened. There were several occasions when they all were invited over to the mansion, so it was very nice in that way.

B: Let's see, I am about running out of specific questions, I think.

One more thing, you mentioned that Mr. Johnson changed your title to executive assistant.

H: Yes.

B: Don't you still use the term executive clerk as a matter of tradition?

H: No, I still use executive assistant. In other words, the man who works under me now, we call him the executive clerk.

B: Oh, I see. But you are formally the executive assistant?

H: Yes. I would say that change is more in the title than in duties. The duties remain practically the same.

Mr. Johnson was very, very generous. This was all a surprise to me. He gave me a little citation and had a nice little gathering out in the Rose Garden and made a very generous speech out there, words of praise that I know I couldn't live up to. But I took it

Hopkins -- I -- 29

more or less as evidence of his confidence in the civil service as a whole and I just happened to be a symbol. But he was very kind.

B: I have heard people say that Mr. Johnson, perhaps more so than some of his predecessors, has recognized and rewarded by just that kind of thing the permanent civil service of the government. Is that correct?

H: Well, I don't have any statistics or anything like that to base it on. I would say, just as a general observation, that probably at least as much as any of his predecessors, and possibly more. Of course, I think possibly that something that affected that somewhat was the fact that he had been in government a great many years here in Washington coming up and most of it up on the Hill. But I think during that period he developed a certain faith in the civil service, at least in certain echelons of it, that possibly somebody coming in from the outside might not have. I think if you check the records fully that [you will see that] he promoted probably at least as many and maybe more than any of his predecessors.

B: I have what is practically the last question. I really can't resist asking it, although it may be downright impertinent or perhaps sacrilegious. Does it really make a difference to your operation who is president? You have been there since Herbert Hoover was president.

H: Well, I hardly know how to answer that. I am not sure that I know what you mean. I can only say that you have to have a great deal of elasticity. In other words, we are there to serve the president

Hopkins -- I -- 30

and the members of his staff loyally to the best of our ability and in the way that they want it done. There are no handbooks, guidebooks and that sort of thing in the White House office. The new administration coming in many times wants to know if you have got them, but I think after they have been there a few months they understand why you don't have them and why you shouldn't have them.

You hear a great deal about institutionalizing the presidency. There again, in my honest opinion, that would be a mistake. You can't encase the president in concrete because no two of them operate the same way. Mr. Johnson, for instance, liked to, well, the term you always heard was "maintain his options." He didn't want to be bound by time or commitments, in other words, somebody else telling him what to do. So in that area many times he wouldn't make known his decisions about doing this or doing that until the last minute, which seemed to bother many people. Other presidents operate entirely differently. But there again, I think that it has got to be so that each president operates in his own way and if you encase him in concrete, he can't do that. So that's one of the reasons I think it is much better rather than pass a law that the president has got to do so and so as far as his immediate office is concerned, let him determine that himself by executive order or however he wants to do it how he runs his daily schedule. President Truman, for instance, had daily staff meetings of his top staff. Other presidents have had something akin to that, but nothing to the extent President Truman had. I think that was one of the secrets of President Truman's success. In my opinion, he is probably the

Hopkins -- I -- 31

best administrator that has been in the White House as far as his own office is concerned since my time. And I think that daily staff meeting was the secret of it. On the other hand, other presidents, it wouldn't serve their purpose.

B: Others used other methods like President Eisenhower and Sherman Adams as chief of staff.

H: Yes. You have the matter of the so-called staff system, which was used under President Eisenhower. It is used to a certain extent today, possibly. Other presidents have not used that. I am sure that system probably served President Eisenhower very well. I don't think it would have served President Johnson. I don't think it would have served President Truman. I am sure it wouldn't have served President Roosevelt. They just do not operate that way. Someone has said, when you have staff system you have organized confusion; when you don't have the staff system, you have disorganized confusion. So it is how the president wants to operate. We have to be elastic and pliable and still be there to respond to queries from the staff or the President relayed through the staff as to how best to do this, what should be done with this document, who should see that one and that sort of thing.

B: In other words, you are flexible within a certain framework of basically good operating procedure.

H: Yes.

B: Is there anything else about Mr. Johnson's tenure that stands out in your mind that you think should be recorded in this kind of procedure?

Hopkins -- I -- 32

H: Well, I don't know that there is, other than most of his staff were very pleasant to work with and most of my dealing, I would say, were with his private secretary, Mrs. [Juanita] Roberts. A great deal of the official documentation, executive orders, proclamations, legislation, that sort of thing that moved from our office after the proper staff people had seen it, moved down through her. She was very good in making sure that we got back everything we could, so it would be properly documented. In other words, she had in mind all the time the future, the Johnson Library.

We worked closely in administrative matters with Mr. Watson in the matter of the White House office administration, with Mr. [Joe] Califano, of course, in certain areas in the preparation of speeches and other documents of that kind. In other words, it was a matter of basically just the technical preparation of them, not the writing of them or anything. Of course, that was done in other areas. But the staff all were very nice and considerate to all of us and we appreciated that, but by and large that has been my experience ever since I have been at the White House. I think the people who serve the president are outstanding. I am talking about the staff they bring in with them. They've been there to serve the president. With few exceptions, I don't think they have been personally ambitious to the extent at least that they let that take precedence over their loyalty and desire to help the president in office.

B: Anything else, sir, you would like to add to this?



Hopkins -- I -- 33

H: I believe that's about all unless you have something else.

B: I don't think so, sir. Sure appreciate your time.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION  
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE  
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of William J. Hopkins

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, William J. Hopkins of Washington, D.C. do hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted on June 6, 1969 in Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

William J. Hopkins  
Donor

October 16, 1978  
Date

James B. Rhoads  
Archivist of the United States

November 6, 1978  
Date