INTERVIEW I

DATE: November 26, 1968

INTERVIEWEE: JAMES R. JONES

INTERVIEWER: DOROTHY PIERCE

PLACE: Fish Room of the White House, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

P: Mr. Jones, you received your present appointment as special assistant to the President with responsibilities as appointments secretary in May, 1968. In January, 1968 you were commissioned deputy special assistant to the President. From November 1966 to January, 1968 you served as assistant to Mr. W. Marvin Watson, who was the appointments secretary to the President. And during your Army service from 1964 to 1966 you were assigned to the White House beginning in February of 1965. Is this background information correct?

J: That's correct. Actually I was Marvin Watson's assistant from the time I came to the White House in February 1965 until the appointment as deputy special assistant in January of this year. My army situation was that I was on loan from the Defense Department to the White House and assistant to Marvin Watson. When I finished my army tour of duty I became part of the White House rolls.

I'll tell one story in relation to coming here. I had done some work in the campaign of 1964 as an advance man first for President Johnson in New York City in June of 1964, which was the first time I had done any advance work. Then I ended up

putting the advance operation together for the Lady Bird Special which was the train tour through eight southern states, on which Mrs. Johnson and Lynda and Luci were the chief attractions.

Following that experience I went into the Army in November of 1964, served at Fort Benning; was on my way to another assignment that I had volunteered for. [I] stopped through Washington before going to Baltimore for my next schooling, and stopped in the East Wing to say hello to Elizabeth Carpenter and some of the ladies I had met from the Lady Bird Special. And Liz in the meantime had sent a note to Jack Valenti--this was before I came here--and said that I had done these certain things for the Lady Bird Special, and that she thought that Jack Valenti ought to get me on the White House staff. So when I said hello to Liz, she said, "Go see Jack Valenti." I met with Jack Valenti and did not know him at all. We visited for a while, and I left.

I went to Fort Holabird, Maryland and checked in. And I made quite an impression because all over the fort, everywhere I went, they said, "The White House is calling." For a first lieutenant, that was quite an accomplishment. And they said, "Marvin Watson was calling." I didn't know whether Marvin Watson was the janitor or anything--I had never heard of him before and had never met him in my life. So I tried to reach him, and I found out he was in New York for the weekend. Monday morning I called back and said, "This is Jim Jones. I understand you're looking for me." He said, "That's right." He was very gruff and abrupt on the telephone. So I said, "When would you like to see me?" He said, "Right now."

So I came down here, and we met right here in the Fish Room. I was sitting in about this position, and he was sitting to my left. We talked about ten minutes. He'd

seen my background, and he wanted to know my thoughts on various things. We talked about ten minutes, and he said, "Are you ready to go to work?" I said, "Well, I think you will have to change my orders and a few things like that." So he called General Clifton and said, "We want him to start work." Said, "How long will it take you to get an apartment." I said, "Give me a couple of hours." I was back by about noon, and we've been going ever since.

P: This is going to back up some of my questions. I of course realized your experience was going to begin in 1965 with your White House background. Before I go back to the 1964 campaign, though, let me ask you when you first met Lyndon Johnson.

J: I first met him when I was on Capitol Hill as an assistant to Congressman Edmondson of Oklahoma, and this was in the 1962 campaign. Then-Vice President Johnson was going to make some television tapes with the Oklahoma congressional delegation, and they were primarily aimed at helping those candidates who had opposition that year--primarily Senator Mike Monroney. I met him in the studios at the Capitol where this tape was going to take place. And my first exposure to him was when he was chewing out one of his aides for writing a nondescript script for him to use on this television program. He let him know in no uncertain terms that he didn't care for that quality of work.

P: Who was the aide?

J: Ivan Sinclair. Then I had no further exposure to him until--

P: Did he speak to you then at that time, or you just saw him?

J: Just hello--a cordial handshake as he has done with millions of others. And then subsequent to that, while I was in night law school at Georgetown and working full-time for Congressman Edmondson, Tommy Boggs, who is the son of Hale Boggs, was a

classmate of mine. Tommy knew Vice President Johnson. And he told me that the Vice President was trying to put together a group of young people who would primarily do advance work in 1964 in the campaign, and that this group would jell together, and then if he decided to run for president in 1968 this would be the hard core of people that would carry him through the campaign. I was quite impressed to meet anyone, much less a vice president, because I was quite recently from a small town in Oklahoma.

P: When was this that you discussed this with [Tommy Boggs]?

J: That was in 1963.

P: After the assassination?

J: In the spring of 1963. No, before [the assassination]. And so I didn't hear too much further until the summer of 1963, about August of 1963. Tom Boggs said that Vice President Johnson was going to have a swimming party to meet these young people who were being put together in this advance team. So we went out to The Elms. There's a kind of funny story to that too. I didn't swim, although I had taught swimming, I didn't know how to swim myself. And this was about the time the Bobby Kennedy parties were having everybody tossed in the pool. So Tom Boggs said that he was going to toss me in the pool and watch me drown in front of the Vice President. I was scared to death. So I learned to swim in two days time before I went out to the Vice President's house.

We went to The Elms and he greeted us and made a little speech to us in a sort of receiving room off to the right as you walk in The Elms. And he talked about some trips that he had been making, he told what it was to be a good advance man and a bad advance man. He pointed out the attributes of being a staff man; that anonymity was one of the most important assets--loyalty and anonymity. At that time he told the story of

when he was a young congressman in 1940, he was head of the House Democratic Campaign Committee. And after the 1940 elections in which President Roosevelt was re-elected and the Democratic Congress was maintained, Drew Pearson wrote a column which almost single-handedly attributed the victory for the Democrats to this young congressman from Texas named Lyndon Johnson. And shortly after that column appeared, President Roosevelt called then-Congressman Johnson and invited him down to the White House for a Sunday lunch. And they were talking about a lot of things, and all of a sudden President Roosevelt said, "You know, Lyndon, I've had a lot of good men work for me and help me along. I had one man that just did marvelous work, he was great on staff work, I just relied upon him. Then one day he just couldn't keep his light under the bushel any longer, and he started appearing in newspaper columns and the stories were attributing all the successes to him and everything. And you know, he lost all of his usefulness to me." And so that was the point. He used that story to illustrate that when we as advance men went out, we were to remain in the background to quietly put all the pieces together so that he would have a successful trip, but we were not to be giving out interviews on things we didn't know anything about.

Then we did have swimming and hors d'oeuvres. It was a very cordial and successful afternoon. And that's the last time I had any contact with him until June 1964 when Tommy Boggs and a lawyer here in Washington named Joe Moran called me and asked me if I wanted to go to New York and help advance the trip the President was making to the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. And I went up with them and advanced that.

P: Then this invitation to the swimming pool party was not exactly an acceptance as an

advance man for the future campaign?

J: No. Actually all he was trying to do was get acquainted with people; look them over; talk to them; see who he liked, who he didn't; and give them an opportunity to hear him. There was no pitch at all as far as asking us to sign up with him or anything like that. He told stories from his past political life. He told stories about The Elms; how Mrs. Johnson had bought new furniture and it was antiques and what have you, and it was all very darling and expensive and historic but he couldn't sit on them, and things like that. It was a very pleasant afternoon--no hard sell at all.

P: In these first two times that you have mentioned, can you recall what your impressions were of Mr. Johnson?

J: Well, I'd have to go back farther than that. I'd have to go back to the 1960 campaign really, even in the late 1950s when I was in high school and college. I had the impression just from reading the newspapers that here was a big, gangly, wheeler-dealer politician, the type of which I knew so well in Oklahoma, which is the old courthouse politician. So I had a very negative impression of him as someone who was hard and cold and cruel, and everything was just for political gain and that type of thing, and who, rather than using reasoned logic, appealed to the basic instincts and backwoods emotions of the electorate.

Then my first impression of him was really at that swimming party in, I think it was August of 1963, and he appeared to be a very outgoing, big man. It was impressive just to look at him. He seemed to be very warm and cordial, but he still didn't make a particular impression on me. He didn't make that strong an impression on me until after I came here and actually saw him under pressure, saw him with his family, saw how he

treated staff, saw his concern for people he liked--it wasn't until then that I saw him as a human being. If I could "out-Jack Valenti" Jack Valenti, I think then that's how strongly I feel in favor of him.

But the first impressions weren't good. As a matter of fact, the way I got into this whole deal [was] when Tommy Boggs asked me out of the cold when we were studying for a law exam who would I support for president in 1968. So I told him of the possibilities as I saw it in mid-1963, and I saw Bobby Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson as the only two real possibilities. And I thought Bobby Kennedy would rend the party with great division, I thought Lyndon Johnson had gained international exposure that I didn't think he had had in the Senate, and so I said, "Lyndon Johnson." I could just as easily have said Bobby Kennedy and not been working here today.

P: To go back to this 1964 campaign, I think it would be easiest to chronologically approach your association with the President, you spoke of advancing this one meeting in New York for the Ladies Garment Union. Do you recall any events? What did you have to do in the capacity of advance man?

J: All I recall is that I was scared to death that we weren't going to have a crowd. I had never done any advance work before. And David Dubinsky, who was then president of the union said, "Don't worry. Everything's going to be in good shape, you just leave it to me. How many people do you want?" And I said, "Well, we'd like to have five thousand people out in front of this hall, we'd like to have the hall packed, and we'd like to have this auditorium packed." He said, "They'll be there."

So I got word from the Secret Service that the plane had landed and the President was on the motorcade on his way in. So I went upstairs--it was, as I recall, about the

tenth floor or so in this building where he was going to make his first speech--and told Dubinsky, "He's on his way, and we'd better be going down." I looked out the window, and I guess there was not fifteen people out in front; and I rushed back to Dubinsky and I said, "Good God, you promised me five thousand people." He said, "Oh good God--oh, we'll get those people!" And I swear, by the time I got from the tenth floor downstairs they had nearly five thousand people; I don't know how they mass-produced them, but they did.

I remember that they had everything cleared on the sidewalk so that it would be just Dubinsky opening the car door for the President when he got out, and all the photographers would get it. And I thought Dubinsky was right behind me. It turned out he had stayed up on the tenth floor. I looked down, and a block-and-a-half away came the President of the United States. He didn't know Jim Jones from Adam, and I felt like I was naked in the middle of New York City standing out there ready to open his car door. I sent a policeman for Dubinsky and he came down. The President obviously did not know me, but that particular day was a successful day for him. I made no impression on him at all, except just doing the job of advance man.

P: Who else did you work with?

J: Joe Moran and Tom Boggs.

P: And then your only participation in the 1964 campaign was the whistle-stop tour?

J: The whistle-stop tour, Mrs. Johnson's.

P: Could you tell me a little about that?

J: Very briefly on that. One of the ex-Kennedy, or one of the present-Kennedy workers, named Jerry Bruno was in charge of the advance operation for President Johnson, and he

wasn't doing much in my judgment. So we had quite an argument, and I ended up not being on the advance operation for the President. Everybody who had a run-in with Jerry Bruno was put together as the advance group for the Lady Bird Special.

What we did on that was about two to three weeks before the train actually took off we took a drive through these eight states to pinpoint where we wanted to have the train stop and how we wanted to play each stop, whether you wanted to have bands here, there, and how many people, and how you wanted to situate it all.

Then once we made that dry run, we came back and assigned advance men to each stop, in some cases two or three. And we put them through an advance man's school. We put together a manual of what you do--everything from publicity to details of where you put a microphone, everything; all they had to do was to follow this from A to Z, because most of these men had known nothing about it. Little did they know that I didn't know much more about it than they did, but it worked out all right. We had kind of a school and pep talk and all of this and sent these fellows out. They were in the field at their various stops for about a week or less than a week, and we called them every night.

P: How many was this?

J: It seems to me like there were about thirty-three stops.

P: And that many people too?

J: There were more than that. There were probably about forty people; we had a couple in some places. In New Orleans, we had three people there.

P: Was this a one-shot advance man slot? Did you bring them on in this capacity just for this tour?

J: Oh, yes. All of these people were employed somewhere else; they just gave their time.

We kept in constant touch with them by telephone up until the time the train left. It was a three-day trip, and I forget how many cars now--something like ten or twelve cars--and made quite an impression.

P: Were you on the train?

J: Yes.

P: What stands out very strongly in your mind about that trip?

J: A lot of things. Number one, the graciousness of the First Lady. She was a real trooper. I remember coming to one stop, I think it was High Point, North Carolina. Let me backtrack just a minute. Before we would come into a town--for example, High Point--in the preceding town the local politicians would get on the train and ride in with you. So they would file off first, and that way the local people would see that they had been with the First Lady and visited and all; and they'd file off and get their little introductions. Then the First Lady is escorted out to the rear of the train. I believe it was High Point, North Carolina or Rocky Mount--one of those places--the train stopped and lurched; and Mrs. Johnson fell back right on her caboose, just spread-eagled in the most ignominious fashion; and I'm sure it hurt a little bit. Everybody else in the train car was talking. She picked herself up; nobody knew it except her Secret Service man and myself; and she did it with such grace and charm--she just went right out and made her speech as though nothing had ever happened.

And in Columbia, South Carolina, and in Charleston, South Carolina, she was booed, and she just handled it with such charm. She never got flustered, she never called names, she always told them that they had their right to speak, she has the same right, she hoped they would show her the courtesy. And in every instance she just handled the

crowd without any problems. Luci and Lynda both did excellent jobs too. One of them traveled two days--I guess it was a four-day trip--and then the other one traveled two days. They would make short speeches, and Luci was the big hit; she was magnetic. I guess that's the time when Luci was doing the Watusi and all the wild dances, and she really made an impression, and did a good job on her speaking. The size of the crowds that turned out made a great impression on me too, because you wouldn't ordinarily expect this kind of a turnout for a first lady.

P: In your judgment, is this still an effective means of campaigning?

J: I think so, yes. I think it proved the difference in 1968 in Ohio for Nixon. He had that campaign train through there, and I don't believe Humphrey did. It brings back a bit of nostalgia of the old days. At the same time you can cover a lot of ground and there's a lot of color to it so the press has things to write about. I think it's effective.

P: And in the case of having the First Lady doing it too?

J: When you've got a first lady like Mrs. Johnson, I think it's very effective.

P: Are there any other events that stand out in your mind about the 1964 campaign that you worked on?

J: No, I didn't have any other personal contact with the first family.

P: Mr. Jones, you're quite young, and it has been said that Mr. Johnson surrounds himself with younger men, which could create a generation gap. Do you think there's any validity in this?

J: Could create a generation gap?

P: Regarding understanding of politics.

J: I don't think so. He has a remarkable sense of people. If they're political opponents he

knows what makes them tick; if they're on his staff, he knows how far they can be pushed and how much capacity they have of understanding it. [That] has been my judgment. I think there are a lot of things that he handed me that I've done, and there would be a point beyond which Marvin Watson would do it when I first came here for example, because Marvin had the judgment and the understanding of a particular way to handle something. I have never found the President in any way difficult to understand, even by young people, when he has this personal contact with them. He's terribly difficult to understand over anything that's mechanical--anything in the media of cameras, television cameras, tape recorders, things like that--because he likes eye contact. He likes to judge people when he's looking at them; he knows whether he's getting through; if he can push them; if he has to hold back; exactly what he has got to do to make his point. I've never seen him in a young audience fail to get a point across.

P: Do you think that perhaps he does need them young and energetic? Is there any truth to the fact that he wears them out?

J: Oh, I don't think so. I used a joke one time making a speech, that "You've read a lot in the newspapers"--this was a couple of years ago--"that this is an administration of tired old men. I'm here to dispute that fact; I say it's an administration of tired young men." It's not true though. I find that at the end of each day--at least I can only speak for myself--I'm almost completely sapped of all energy and the next day I'm completely reinvigorated and ready to go.

P: There has been a rather large turnover in presidential assistants. To what would you attribute that?

J: I don't think there has been a large turnover of Johnson assistants. The turnover has come

about because most of the staff--well, he had two staffs when he came in as president: he had the Kennedy staff and the Johnson staff. Of the Johnson staff, he has lost very few people. In comparison to other administrations, I would say it's probably average. He has lost Walter Jenkins through an unfortunate situation; he has lost Bill Moyers, and in that particular case I think just lost Bill Moyers to another job. Horace Busby, when he came, was signed for a fixed amount of time because he had other commitments, and Jake Jacobson came for a fixed amount of time because he had a law practice in which he was almost practicing by himself. But of the people that have come in as Johnson staff, I don't think you find much of a turnover.

P: Mr. Jones, how would you classify your own personal political philosophy?

J: Liberal, extremely liberal in regard to civil liberties and civil rights. Probably a moderate on fiscal and monetary matters. And I'd have to say probably moderate on international matters. I'm not a hawk and at the same time, I'm not a dove.

P: How would you define the terms liberal and conservative?

J: Well, in regard to civil rights, I'd say generally giving the benefit of the doubt to another human being, taking away all artificial barriers, such as in housing or in eating establishments, education, job opportunities--taking away all these artificial barriers that keep an individual regardless of his color from gaining his maximum potential. That's where I would classify myself as a liberal.

P: And what, in your thinking, is a conservative approach?

J: I think a conservative approach is having no flexibility as far as established procedures are concerned. If the Negro is a slave in 1860, he's going to be a slave or he's going to have his position at the lower end of town in 1960; maintaining of the status quo in all

these areas of civil rights, civil liberties, is the conservative approach as I see it.

P: In seeking staff opinions on a subject, does Mr. Johnson balance various political philosophies of his staff?

J: Yes, not only on his staff, but elsewhere as well. You never quite know where he's getting all his information. And this leads to how he really developed a credibility gap or the concept of it in the newspapers.

The President will talk to a wide spectrum of people, with a wide range of views. He'll talk to Harry McPherson and Dick Goodwin and to Marvin Watson and Walt Rostow, maybe all on Vietnam; and you've got two completely opposing views and political philosophies. No doubt when he talks to Dick Goodwin, Dick Goodwin probably thinks he is giving him the straight scoop and that the President is going to take that advice, and this is the President's decision. And no doubt when you want to play up your own importance and you're talking to a newspaperman, you're liable to say, "Well, I told the President that I thought we ought to do such-and-such on the bombing on Vietnam, and he indicated that's probably what he's going to do. He argued with me a little bit, but I think he's going to come around to that." And that newspaperman writes that story, and pretty soon it's gospel.

And the fact of the matter is, I have yet to see the President go into any major decision with a preconceived idea that he lets the other person know about. He gets all the viewpoints, gets as much information as he possibly can, and then he makes a decision in private usually. He gets as many people on board and then makes his decision. And a lot of times that decision is totally contrary to all of his advisers; and as a result he develops this credibility gap.

A good case in point--and this will have to be classified--is the bombing halt. Let me backtrack just a little bit. There was somewhat of a split among his advisers as to whether or not he should have a bombing halt or not have a bombing halt; and if he did have, what conditions or requirements would be placed on Hanoi. It started out as a split opinion. Then the more we went on, the more it developed that his advisers wanted this bombing halt, even to the point of sacrificing some of the conditions that were laid down initially. But that, I mean we had three conditions: no violation of the DMZ, no bombing of the cities--no havoc in the cities--and that the Saigon government would have a place at the conference table. And Hanoi wouldn't agree to these. All of the advisers were pretty much in agreement that they should have these three requirements.

But then as the thing wore on, as Moscow worked through its ambassador here, as Hanoi worked through its people in Paris, and as the liberal senators would come out and say, "We've got to have this bombing halt, and Johnson's a warmonger," and this and that; slowly but surely his advisers all kind of crept away. They were willing to have this bombing halt even without all of these requirements--give it a chance. And it ended up just a matter of hours before the decision was actually made that it was Lyndon Johnson on one side and all of his advisers on the other. If he didn't have that inner feeling of confidence that he was right, and I think he was proved right, he would have caved in too. But he argues with his staff. He gets these differing viewpoints. And then in the end he makes that decision himself.

P: Can you tell me who these people are that you were speaking of as advisers?

J: Yes, they're all obvious really. Bill Bundy, Clark Clifford, George Ball; I couldn't tell you whether Rusk [opposed] now, Rusk may have been on his side, I don't know; I

wouldn't want to venture on that; Wheeler to an extent; Rostow to an extent; Dick Helms; and I think Maxwell Taylor. Of course all of this will be classified.

P: Given this approach that the President does request the varying opinions to arrive at his own solutions and conclusions, does this ever create friction in the staff?

J: Oh, surely. The President does things similar to what I understand President Roosevelt did, in that he will give the same assignment or ask an opinion on the same subject from a lot of staff members. And then you get these jurisdictional problems, but they're not lasting or anything. You realize after you catch him at it, more or less, that he's just trying to get the best quality service of whatever he's after.

P: What about within the White House presidential assistants?

J: That's what I had reference to.

P: This doesn't create any havoc in the organization of assistants?

J: No. Everybody recognizes that their particular leader, their particular boss, has a way of operating. And if that way of operating is this, he's the boss. You get accustomed to it. The only ones where you had any frictions or problems really were those people who have already departed the staff and who were more enamored by their own self-importance.

For example, Harry McPherson last year was the principal coordinator for the State of the Union address. He is known as a speech writer, as a wordsmith, as a policy man and what have you. He had been working several months or weeks on the State of the Union address. And then within ten days to two weeks while we were in Texas last Christmas, the President turned the whole thing over to me. And I was not considered a speech writer; I was not considered a policy man in just about virtually every one of those

areas. But he turned it over to me for the coordination of this thing. Now there should have been some natural frictions between Harry and myself. As it turned out, I don't think there were.

[End of Tape I of I and Interview I]

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

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of James R. Jones

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, James R. Jones 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 recordings and transcripts of the personal interviews conducted on November 26, 1968 and June 28, 1969 in Washington, D.C. and June 11, 1972 in Tulsa, Oklahoma and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcripts shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

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

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

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

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

James R. Jones
Donor

1-15-85
Date

John W. Carlin
Archivist of the United States

10-17-01
Date