

INTERVIEW IV

DATE: January 28, 1985

INTERVIEWEE: JAMES R. JONES

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Congressman Jones' office, U.S. Capitol, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: In the earlier sessions, you talked about the events preceding the March 31 [1968] speech and the decision not to seek re-election. Let me just ask you a couple of questions about it. First of all, in your own mind did you ever decide when he really decided not to run, or to add that last paragraph?

J: I think that weekend in September 1967 when John Connally and Mrs. Johnson and the President were down at the Ranch and talked about it most of that weekend is when he seriously thought about it, and probably in his own mind he had tilted, if I had to quantify it, 60-40 that he would not run. I think that he wanted to hang on, though, till the very last moment. It appeared to me on Friday, March 29, when he had George Christian and Marvin Watson and myself in the office--this was after he had announced he was going to address the country on Sunday night and he had a little press conference on Friday. We had a drink in his private office off the Oval Office. He wanted us to argue with him as to whether he should or he shouldn't, and I think he had pretty well made up his mind then for certain, but he just wanted some little out right to the very end, which was the way he made decisions.

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G: Keeping the options open?

J: Yes. It's sort of old-time politics; you always keep a door open that you can walk out of.

G: What was Mrs. Johnson's view at the time, do you recall?

J: In March?

G: During this weekend when he was trying to decide. Did she express an opinion?

J: She did not want him to run again, and she had made expressions like "Now it's my turn," and things that she wanted to do. But she didn't overtly get in that weekend what he should or should not do, at least not in my presence. But it was obvious that she felt it was the right decision, that she did not want him to run again, and it was obvious that in her own sort of subtle ways she had put the pressure on him not to run.

G: Why weren't the allies informed of the decision in advance? Do you think this was also an effort to keep the options open?

J: Yes, I think it was an effort to keep the options open. We had made all of the arrangements so that the allies and key political figures would be notified at the moment he went on television. But I think basically he wanted to keep the option open [so] as to make sure till the very end that that was the right decision, not only the right decision for himself, but the right decision for our country, for what they were doing in Vietnam. He was aware of that; he was aware of the need to inform them. But I suspect that's the reason why.

G: Now, do you recall President [Nguyen Van] Thieu's reaction to the announcement?

J: No, I don't recall that at all.

G: North Vietnam responded almost immediately with this acceptance of the peace offering and proposing to meet in Warsaw, which was I guess not exactly a neutral site as far as

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President Johnson was concerned. Can you recall his reaction to that?

J: No, I really can't. I was looking at some of those questions. Most of the stuff surrounding Vietnam I don't recall. Things were moving rather fast then. I'd leave that one to [Walt] Rostow and some of those.

G: Then it's only a matter of days before Martin Luther King was assassinated. Let me ask you to recall what you can about that event, how you learned of it, the President's reaction.

J: Well, that was the night we had a Democratic fund-raiser in Washington, and we were in the Oval Office. I believe it was Arthur Krim and myself, seems like there was one other, and the President, I can't remember who it was. But it seems to me that I got a call, and I can't remember from whom, in my office and took it into the Oval Office that Martin Luther King had been shot. And I know if John Criswell wasn't there, we got him on the phone shortly after that to explain the President would not be going to the Democratic fund-raiser, that that would not be appropriate. Then it was shortly after that we started getting the responses of civil turmoil, and I can't remember whether it was that night or the next night where things erupted in Washington. I remember that [Joseph] Califano set up sort of a command post, I believe in his office. That was when all the troops were called and all that.

G: Mrs. Johnson was away, as I recall it, maybe in Texas.

J: You'd have to check on that. I thought she was in the Mansion and was getting ready to go to the Democratic dinner, but you might check on that.

G: Let's talk about LBJ and Martin Luther King a little bit. What was his, first of all, reaction to the shooting? And the significance?

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J: He felt at some point in 1968 that there was a level of hatred and a level of tension in this country that was going to bring about some violence. I think I heard him express it about King, but I know I've heard him express it about Bobby Kennedy. The way he was going into the crowds and all, he was really just asking to get shot and what have you. As far as his relationship with King, I think Johnson believed to a certain degree some of the things that J. Edgar Hoover was sending over about King. I think to a certain degree Johnson believed that King was hypocritical in that he was preaching all the things on religion and yet allegedly having all of these orgies in Washington and everywhere else. So I think there was that feeling that he was hypocritical. I think there was a feeling that he was politically naive, that he was undercutting some of the things that Johnson was trying to do. I think that Johnson, on the whole civil rights thing, at one level felt that he was not given proper credit for civil rights, that the Kennedys--Bobby Kennedy, Jack Kennedy and what have you--were given disproportionate credit, and that in fact they did not have the same commitment to move as fast and as far in civil rights as Johnson was.

On the other hand, I remember him telling the story, which may have been on the other tape, one night--it was either in the Cabinet Room or up in the Mansion in the private dining room--but there were a whole bunch of blacks demonstrating in front of the White House, and somebody said, "Don't you feel betrayed, after all you've done for them, to have them out there demonstrating against you?" And he said no, that it was perfectly understandable, that they were like a bunch of wild stallions with two pens. He said, "All we have done is unlock the gate in the inner pen, and they can now finally see daylight and they're going to kick down the fence to finally get their freedom." He said that basically we're just going through that period when they're finding their way out of

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one pen and into real freedom.

G: Did he see King as having taken credit that was rightfully his for some of the accomplishments in civil rights?

J: No, I don't ever remember him expressing that.

G: Was King's opposition to Vietnam a factor?

J: I think probably so. Johnson was very sensitive to Vietnam. He had expressed himself that had he started from the very beginning he would not have put us in Vietnam, that he felt he had a commitment, a line of succession of presidents' words, that he had to fulfill, and that those who demonstrated against him really were undercutting his ability to win or to have a success there, and that they were unjustifiably criticizing him. He thought King was in that position, too. But as a general rule I don't recall Johnson really ever mentioning much about Martin Luther King. Johnson was the type who could make outrageous statements about a lot of people that sometimes were cruelly funny and sometimes were meant, and oftentimes were not meant, to be taken literally at all. But King was not one I recall him making many comments about.

G: Why didn't he go to the funeral, do you recall?

J: To the Martin Luther King funeral?

G: Yes.

J: I don't recall except it must have been security. I know the Secret Service was very nervous about all that, and they were nervous about Bobby Kennedy's funeral. I was trying to remember, where was the King funeral? In Atlanta, right?

G: Atlanta.

J: Yes. I don't recall.

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G: He did postpone that trip to Hawaii, I guess.

J: Yes.

G: Anything on the riots in Washington, his perception of those?

J: I don't recall him getting out and seeing them. I know it made a big impression on me to suddenly be going from the White House late at night and having National Guard and armed soldiers at every street corner. That was kind of eerie. I don't recall him getting out and seeing it. He was more concerned that the command post actually keep civil order and yet not overreact. That was something he did worry about, that there would be an overreaction in Washington and that it would precipitate a far wider problem.

G: Open housing is one of the measures that he pushed as a result of this, or at least in the wake of this. Can you recall his espousal of the open housing bill after the [riots]?

J: Yes, but only generally. I don't recall any particular anecdotes or anything he said about that other than that that was something, as I recall, that was on the agenda in January that made him pause in wanting to move it through the Congress a little farther before he announced he wasn't going to run. Then I think he used the King funeral as a means to kind of push forward, as I recall the events.

G: Let's talk a little bit about politics during that period after March 31. You discussed the meeting that he had with Robert Kennedy in that period. I think [Theodore] Sorensen and Rostow were there. LBJ went out to address the broadcasters convention in Chicago. He met with Mayor [Richard] Daley then. Do you remember that trip?

J: Yes, it was the very next day. We flew out there the morning of April 1. He spoke to the broadcasters. I thought it was one of the best speeches he'd ever made. He gave a review of sort of his life in politics and sort of a philosophical view of why things were done. He

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did meet with Mayor Daley on the plane. I was making arrangements, so I didn't sit in on the meeting, so I don't know. I was in and out and I wasn't paying any attention to the conversation. There was a part of the conversation that dealt with Vietnam and dealt with how it was affecting the Democrats' chances and all of that, but I was just in and out so I don't recall making any notes on the conversation.

G: Was there anything on the suggestion of moving the [Democratic National] Convention from Chicago?

J: No. There had been, early on, a lot of FBI reports on what to expect and all of that, and I think there had been some recommendations about considering another site and all. And always the response was that they'd handle it, that the Chicago police could handle it, et cetera. So there was no serious consideration given to that at all.

G: Daley really didn't want the convention moved, I understand.

J: Yes.

G: He was very adamant about that.

J: Right.

G: Was the President equally adamant or was he just going along with whatever the prevailing sentiment was?

J: I never heard him express himself if there was any serious recommendation to move it, because it was always just a progress report, both the intelligence reports on what to expect, the trouble to expect, and whether or not it could be handled, the progress reports on the convention center itself. And so to my recollection there was no serious intent on anybody's part to move it.

G: Did Mayor Daley have a candidate at this point, in the wake of LBJ's announcement?

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J: No, I don't think so. There had been--and again my memory is fuzzy--but Johnson suspected that Bobby Kennedy had gotten with Daley and that Daley was secretly committed to him. That didn't bother Johnson so much. Ironically, Johnson wasn't all that upset about Bobby Kennedy succeeding him. He didn't want him; he preferred Humphrey. But that was I know one of the arguments that was made by me on that March 29 was that he's gone too far, that now if he doesn't run, Bobby Kennedy will in fact get the nomination. And that didn't bother him; that wasn't a persuading factor. So I think what really rankled Johnson was that for political reasons Daley was making certain suggestions to him on Vietnam and withdrawals and all of that, and that that had been prompted by Bobby Kennedy. I think that really rankled Johnson because he genuinely felt that the Vietnam thing could be won and could be successfully negotiated out if he had some political solidarity of support back home.

G: Do you think that from his meeting with Daley he bought any time from Daley, he kept Daley from jumping ship on Vietnam or at least being nominally supportive?

J: I don't know. That would be just speculation. I just don't know.

G: Now, O'Brien left the administration at this point and joined the Kennedy campaign. Do you recall this event and whether there was pressure from the Kennedy camp to get O'Brien and whether O'Brien was reluctant to leave?

J: I don't know what prompted Larry to leave except it was, I guess, just going back home. I'm sure there was pressure, and I'm sure that that sort of Irish Mafia pressure was weighing on him. I know he brought it to Johnson, and Johnson was mad. I think he did feel a betrayal but didn't brood over it. I don't recall, but I think probably the communications from Larry to Johnson for the rest of the presidency was--I think it was

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cut off. I don't believe there was any more.

G: And I guess O'Brien had been one of the few real bridges.

J: Yes. Larry had been very loyal to the Johnson Administration. Johnson liked him, respected him. I think that shows in the postmaster general thing. And I think he was probably a little surprised and felt betrayed.

G: Okay. LBJ ordered all of the cabinet members and other presidential appointees to stay out of campaigns. Do you remember the background of this policy?

J: No. No, I don't. I just don't recall that at all.

G: Some of them had taken sides, I guess.

J: Yes.

G: Humphrey announced for the presidency on April 27, and this was almost a month after March 31. Do you have any insight as to why he waited so long before he got into the race?

J: Just recalling the expression on his face on March 31 when we went over to his apartment--I think I went into that, didn't I?--I think he really was almost paralyzed by it. I don't think he expected the decision of Johnson not to run, and his whole campaign was one of delays. He did not do all of the mechanical things that should have been done in a timely fashion. I don't think it was [for lack of money], because he could have had plenty of financial support, and there was an awful lot of--you know, Johnson was still strong as horseradish, at least in campaign financing, and Humphrey would have inherited practically all of that but did not vigorously go at it. I don't know what he was doing.

G: Johnson's trip to Hawaii in mid-April for the Honolulu Conference. Do you remember that? Did you go along?

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J: Yes, I went on that, and I'm trying to--see, we had two or three conferences in Hawaii in the four years I was there. Is this the one where we stayed at somebody's private home? [We] stayed at Clare [Booth] Luce's home, I believe. Maybe you'll have to check the logs. Yes, I recall that.

G: I know he stayed at the Ranch the weekend before while he was preparing for that, and he stopped at President Eisenhower's home on the way in Palm Desert. Do you remember that?

J: Well, I remember--was that when we played golf with Eisenhower?

G: I think so.

J: Yes, okay. Was that the same trip that we landed by helicopter on an aircraft carrier off San Diego or somewhere and had the day and night landings?

G: I'll check the log on that. I'm not sure, but it could easily be.

J: Yes. I remember we helicoptered to Palm Desert--I was thinking that was in 1966, though; it could have been 1968--and did meet with Eisenhower. He sort of regularly stayed in touch with Eisenhower. Not only did he know it was good politics, but he had a great respect for Eisenhower's sort of common-sense judgment. What Eisenhower recommended to him then, I don't honestly recall. I recall the golf game, which I may have gone into.

G: No.

J: We played there, and the press was not allowed except to cover the eighteenth hole or the last hole, which was a dogleg right, so you didn't see the tee shot. And Eisenhower was just a steady golfer. Of course, Johnson was very erratic; I don't think Johnson played more than three or four games of golf at most in the four years I was there. He was very

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erratic, and Eisenhower was winning well with his steady play. And it came to the eighteenth hole where the press was, and Johnson just hit it straight down, it was on in two, as I recall, and beat Eisenhower on the last hole in front of the press. As usual Johnson was a clutch player.

But they did meet, but I don't recall the substance of precisely what Eisenhower recommended to him. I believe that Eisenhower supported the decision on the bombing halt and the negotiations and had the same concerns Johnson did about disengaging from Vietnam, but I just can't recall the specific conversation.

G: Any talk on politics, do you remember? It was generally conceded that Nixon would be the nominee.

J: I think so. I just don't recall it. I just don't recall it.

G: All right. In early May he flew to Kansas City to visit with President Truman. Did you go on that trip?

J: Yes.

G: Let me ask you to recount anything you can on that.

J: Again, I think it was on the way to the Ranch, wasn't it? Let me put that in the context of what else was going on. May. . . .

G: Well, he announced that day that Hanoi was prepared to meet in Paris on April [May] 10. Nixon called for a moratorium of criticism on LBJ.

J: Let's see. The Kansas City thing I thought we were going to the Ranch, and we stopped off there. It was just a regular briefing of President Truman, as I recall. President Truman was not--he had sort of deteriorated in his health. As I recall that meeting, it was just "I'm with you. Do the right thing. You're the boss. I've had my turn" kind of thing.

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G: Another trip that month, he went to the Garment Workers Union convention in Atlantic City. Do you remember that? Did you go to that?

J: I don't even remember that at all. I'm sure I went, but I don't remember that one at all.

G: Anything on his meeting with Australian Prime Minister [John] Gorton at the White House?

J: No, as I say, I was in and out of meetings; I'd leave that to Rostow on the substance of it. That again was a coordinating thing. Australia really was a staunch ally. What's Gorton's first name? He had had trouble with [Edward] Gough Whitlam, or did Gorton replace Whitlam or did Whitlam replace Gorton? I don't remember. Gorton had been an ally, anyway; Whitlam was the one that was not.

G: In mid-May, Humphrey, [while] campaigning, made several misstatements on Vietnam. One that the *Pueblo* crew may be released as part of a parcel in the Paris peace talks. He also told students that it had been agreed to admit the Viet Cong to the Paris peace talks and [he] had to retract some of these statements. Do you remember this and LBJ's reaction to these statements?

J: Yes, I just vaguely recall that Hubert made an awful lot of statements that angered Johnson, and he was constantly having to bring him in check. I just don't recall these in particular. I don't think we're very helpful on this; my memory is getting fuzzier.

G: During this campaign season Humphrey seems to take the position that he was always or had earlier been a dove on Vietnam, that he had disagreed with the policy. Was this the case, do you recall?

J: No, Hubert Humphrey was a team player. Whatever he thought privately, I don't ever recall him making any public statements, either in cabinet meetings or. . . . He may have

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talked to Johnson personally when the two of them were alone somewhere. But no, he was a gung ho team player, as a matter of fact. He believed in what we were doing, believed in the decisions, and went out and pitched them. Of course, he had that kind of a reverence for the presidency. He was one who felt that a decision made by the president was almost infallible.

G: At this stage of the peace negotiations, did LBJ delegate substantially to [Averell] Harriman and [Cyrus] Vance or did he himself want to be involved in the fine print of the [negotiations]?

J: He delegated pretty well. He was kept informed of the fine points in the negotiations, but he delegated it. He kept control over the fine points, but it came through [Dean] Rusk and Rostow. But no, he didn't try to direct it, as I recall.

G: Now, during this period you also had a fight over the 10 per cent surtax. Wilbur Mills was pushing for a six-billion-dollar cut as a price for supporting that. Do you recall the deliberations between LBJ and Mills here?

J: I can't remember the time frame. I know that from the time Johnson first suggested the surtax, almost fourteen months went by before it went through the Congress. A long period of that time we were trying to get Wilbur Mills to come down to visit with the President and could not get him down. He had one excuse after another. Finally I think we made contact and brought him down to the Ranch, if I'm not mistaken, and they visited. It might have been at the White House. But they visited and it moved shortly thereafter.

G: Of course, there was this cut, this six-billion-dollar cut.

J: In the spending, you mean?

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G: Yes.

J: Yes. Yes.

G: Was LBJ reluctant to cut the spending to this extent?

J: No, he never seemed wedded to that. Basically he was responding to what his economists were telling him he had to do to keep from overheating the economy. He didn't dig in his heels except as I recall in what was needed for Vietnam.

G: In retrospect should he have asked for the surtax earlier and more vigorously than he did?

J: Probably more vigorously. If he had been able to get the surtax when he first asked for it, probably it would have mitigated the inflation considerably. And if it had been kept on by Nixon, I think that would also. . . .

G: Any insights on the relationship between LBJ and Wilbur Mills? Two strong personalities.

J: Yes. Basically Wilbur Mills and John Connally in their relationships to Johnson were very similar. They were both very wily characters, and they were sort of characters with capital letters. They were sort of old-school politicians, and they were just like two old foxes circling each other. Neither one of them--one of their responses was not to see the other or talk to the other until they were ready themselves. I don't think that's done much anymore.

G: This is a good example, that Wilbur Mills simply wouldn't meet with LBJ, wouldn't come to the White House.

J: Yes.

G: Any other manifestations of Mills' opposition?

J: No. Mills did not like to lose. He ran his committee in a way that they sort of trusted

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him, and he didn't bring something out unless he could pass it. I think his whole thing was he didn't care whether--he probably felt the surtax was needed, but he just didn't want to bring something out that would lose on the House floor. That was, I suspect, why he wouldn't meet with Johnson and wouldn't get drawn into doing something too early.

G: The Poor People's Campaign began in mid-May. Let me ask you to recall what you can about the White House view of this.

J: Well, again, Johnson was worried. This was the tent city and all of that?

G: Yes.

J: Yes. Of [Ralph] Abernathy's. I think Johnson was worried that it could lead to more civil disorder and that all of that detracted from what he was trying to do in Vietnam. I think he really felt that if he could--and I think when you get right down to it, the prime motivating factor for him not running for re-election was he felt that that was the most effective way to extricate himself from Vietnam and to conclude that phase successfully, or semi-successfully. I think that was just an obsession with him, an overriding obsession. And I believe that he looked on the whole tent city operation as something that could get out of hand and deflect from what he was interested in, [which] is getting out of Vietnam.

G: Did he have any instructions for the cabinet officers in terms of how to deal with the Poor People's Campaign?

J: If he did, I don't recall. I vaguely recall something on the law enforcement end of it. He didn't want some disturbance to get out of hand; he wanted the law to be enforced. But I don't remember what he said to the cabinet, if anything.

G: Anything on LBJ and Ramsey Clark here that might--?

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- J: Well, I don't know, did I talk about the relationship with Ramsey Clark?
- G: You did, very vividly, in the first tapes, but I was just wondering if there was anything specific here that you can recall in this connection.
- J: I don't believe so, other than we got the regular update reports, what they were doing, the regular intelligence reports. Beyond that, the most that I can recall is that he wanted the Justice Department to enforce the law but not do it in a heavy-handed way that would precipitate trouble.
- G: Now, LBJ wanted the Senate to extend the ban on mail-order handguns and shotguns. Do you remember that?
- J: Yes. He pushed on that. I always suspected that that was his thing for the liberals. I don't think it meant much to him one way or the other, but it was good politics.
- G: Anything on the truth-in-lending bill? He signed that in the end of May.
- J: There again, I don't think this was something that was original with him. I think it came out of Califano's shop, somebody thought it up, and it was one more bill to sign. But I don't recall that he had any deep, abiding interest or something from his background that made him push it.
- G: In retrospect there were a lot of consumer measures that he signed into law that--
- J: Came out.
- G: --I suppose were relatively significant in retrospect.
- J: Yes.
- G: Did he recognize the significance of these measures at the time he signed them, do you think?
- J: Yes, I think he recognized the significance, but I don't think he really recognized how

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strong an issue consumerism was, political issue, and at that point it wasn't, I guess. So I don't think he really reaped the benefit from these things that he might have gotten. It was just another bill to sign.

G: Okay.

J: As far as the politics here, these other primaries, he really never mentioned them. That was not a subject of conversation that I recall.

G: Is that right? He was not that actively interested in the primaries?

J: I remember he would watch it on the ticker tape and he'd look at it, but he got his information and didn't dwell on it.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview IV

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