

INTERVIEW I

DATE: June 17, 1969
INTERVIEWEE: JOHN T. JONES, JR.
INTERVIEWER: DAVID McCOMB
PLACE: Mr. Jones' office, Gulf Building, Houston, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

M: First of all, I'd like to know a little bit about your background. Where were you born and when and where did you get your college education?

J: All right. I was born in Dallas, Texas, December 2, 1917. My family moved to Houston while I was still more or less an infant. For all intents and purposes, I consider myself a Houstonian rather than a Dallasite. Certainly I have lived here since I was about eighteen months or two years old. I'm a product of the Houston public schools starting in kindergarten at Montrose School, which was at that time, I think, a pilot kindergarten program. I completed elementary school at Montrose, junior high school at Sidney Lanier, senior high school at San Jacinto Senior High School in Houston. From there I went to the New Mexico Military Institute; I went there, I believe, in 1935. In 1938 I transferred as a junior to the University of Texas. As a senior at the University in 1940 I was called up for active duty in the army prior to graduation, and I still haven't graduated.

I was in the army from January or February of 1941 until January of 1946.

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M: Did you go overseas?

J: Yes, very much so. (Laughter) I was a second lieutenant in the First Armored Division at Fort Knox. This division went to North Ireland in, oh, I've forgotten whether it was late April or early May of 1942. Then from North Ireland I went to England in October, 1942, staged for North Africa, went to North Africa in November. I was captured by the Germans on February 14, Valentine's Day, 1943, at a little place called Sidi-bou-zid. This was the place where the Germans broke through the American lines.

M: Do you know how to spell that?

J: Sidi-bou-zid? S-I-D-I- dash B-O-U- dash Z-I-D. The closest town of any size was Sbeitla, S-B-E-I-T-L-A.

M: This helps our typist.

J: Good. I want to be of all assistance to the typist I can.

I was captured there by a German Panzer division, taken to Tunis and held there for a few days while they assembled their prisoners [and] then flown to Naples, held at Capua, that's C-A-P-U-A, a little town near Naples in a transit camp by the Germans for about two weeks, which they called their quarantine period, to be certain we didn't carry any tropical diseases into Germany. Then I went by train to a German prison camp, Rotenburg-am-Fulda. Do you want me to spell that for you, too?

M: I think we can spell that.

J: I was held there for a while, then eventually sent to an American officers prison camp in Poland at Szubin, S-Z-U-B-I-N. There I was

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liberated, well, not liberated, but marched out when the Russians broke the Vistula line in January, 1945, and marched back into Germany to a prison camp near Potsdam, in a little town of Luckenwalde. There I was liberated in April by a Russian tank division and held by the Russians for two or three weeks. Then finally an American staff car stumbled on us and found out we were there, and the Americans sent some trucks in to pick us up. I was repatriated, I think, May 3, 4 or 5 to the American Army.

M: How long after that before you got out of the army?

J: I went to Camp Lucky Strike, which was a repatriation camp on the French coast near Cherbourg. The principal thing that I remember about that is that it was near Fecamp [?], where they make Benedictine Brandy. I came back to the States in June, landed on June 19 at Camp Patrick Henry at Newport News, [Virginia]. I was sent to Fort Sam Houston, got a couple of months furlough, and before it was time for me to return to any sort of unit, while I was still at Fort Sam Houston after the furlough, the Japanese surrender came. The point system went into effect, and I had more than enough points to get out of the army. So I went, as a captain at this time, on terminal leave, which expired in January, 1946.

M: Then you got out of the army, and did you return to Houston then?

J: Yes. I got out of the army, got married, and returned to Houston.

M: Did you go to work for the Chronicle then, or what?

J: My first job was in the circulation department of the Houston

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Chronicle. I went to work in January, 1946, there after I had married.

M: Yes. It might be important at this point to sketch your relationship to Jesse Jones. He is your uncle, is that right?

J: Jesse Jones was my uncle on my father's side. My father was Jesse Jones' older brother. I'm a junior--John T. Jones, Jr. Mr. Jesse had no children of his own, although he had a number of nephews and nieces.

My father and my uncle and I felt for a long time, primarily through my own wish, that I [should] go into journalism. I had taken quite a few journalism courses while I was at the University of Texas. My majors there were journalism and business administration. I had worked at the Chronicle three or four summers in summer jobs, primarily in the editorial department. It was my uncle's wish that I have as good an overview of the paper as possible. I started off driving a truck for the circulation department. This not only teaches you an awful lot about circulation, but it teaches you a great deal about the city, which has come in very handy.

M: And the Chronicle at that time, as it is now, was owned by the Jones interests.

J: The Chronicle at that time was 100 per cent owned by Jesse H. Jones, and it had been owned by him since, oh, I think the early twenties. He had been a part owner of the Chronicle prior to that time with M. E. Foster. At this time he purchased the balance of the Chronicle from Mr. Foster, Foster being a rather famous journalist.

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M: Yes.

J: Marcellus E. Foster, very famous, especially in this area. He was known as MEFO.

M: Yes.

J: Incidentally, he is the man who founded the Chronicle, and was its editor from the date of its founding until he left.

My experience at the Chronicle was in the circulation department, first as a truck driver and [then] as a district manager, where a number of carrier boys work under you. Then I was in circulation and promotion. I then worked for a period of a couple of years, I think, in the editorial department as a reporter, work which I had done as a summer job prior to this. As a reporter I did a brief stint as a correspondent in Austin during the legislative session, a little bit longer stint as a correspondent in Washington, working out of Bascom Timmons' bureau there; this lasted for several months. Then later I worked as a display advertising salesman and later in the business office. In fact, [I worked in] every part of the paper which was not controlled by union contract.

M: This was, in effect, a management training course.

J: Yes. Nobody called it that, but that's what it was.

M: Then you eventually became president of the Chronicle.

J: Before that, and after I completed this sort of overview thing, in 1949 I believe it was, my uncle appointed me assistant to the president. This was his title at the paper: the president. In 1950

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he appointed himself chairman of the board and elected me president.

As 100 per cent owner, this was easy for him to do.

M: Yes.

J: Then I was president from 1950 until 1965 when I resigned.

M: In this capacity, you must have also had something to do with the television station and radio and the rest of the interests.

J: Yes. Do you want to know what other things I did other than those related to the newspaper?

M: Well, that might be helpful.

J: I was an officer in a number of other corporations, some owned by the Chronicle, some partly owned by the Chronicle, some unrelated to the Chronicle except through the person of Mr. Jones. I was a vice president and later president for the KTRH Broadcasting Company. This was a fifty thousand watt CBS radio station, wholly owned by the Houston Chronicle. I was the president from its founding until the sale of Houston Consolidated Television Company. This was a Channel 13 ABC affiliate which was put together after the freeze was lifted by four competing applicants for the one remaining commercial channel in Houston, KTRH Broadcasting Company being one of these competitive applicants. Another was Mr. Roy Hofheinz, a broadcaster and politician of some substantial renown locally.

M: Yes.

J: Then [there were] two non-broadcast related groups of Houstonians. I think I can say that I was largely effective in trying to get these people together. We all got together; we pooled our interests,

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were granted a license and went on the air in November, 1954. I was president of the organization from the date of its inception until its sale in July, 1967, I guess it was. The station was sold to Capital Cities Broadcasting Corporation.

Other than that, I have served as a director of the Commerce Company; this was a holding company of Mr. Jones' which was dissolved some years back. I served as an officer and director of Jones Lumber Company. I was director for a number of years of what is now the Texas National Bank of Commerce--at that time it was National Bank of Commerce--and resigned as director and vice chairman of its board in 1965.

There were some other things. Oh yes, for many years, too, I was a trustee of Houston Endowment. I resigned from this in July of 1965. That is a charitable trust founded in 1938 by Mr. and Mrs. Jesse H. Jones. This was the principal beneficiary of his estate, and as such it is now the 100 per cent owner of the Houston Chronicle. It recently controlled Texas National Bank of Commerce, but it sold its interest in this late last year to American General Insurance Company.

M: Is it the one that was involved with the building of Jones Hall?

J: Yes. It built Jones Hall.

M: I noticed in the Who's Who accounting of you there was mention of the Rusk Corporation. What's that?

J: Rusk Corporation is a Texas corporation in which my wife and I and our children are the majority stockholders, although we do not hold

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but about, I'd say, three-quarters of it. This corporation has as its principal business radio broadcasting. It owns and operates radio station KTRH. I and the Rusk Corporation purchased the assets of KTRH from the Houston Chronicle in 1964. It was prior to this purchase that I resigned as a trustee of Houston Endowment.

M: You've had a long career in newspaper work and public broadcasting. Did you meet Lyndon Johnson somewhere along the way?

J: Many times. (Laughter) I think my first contact with Lyndon Johnson was prior to his 1948 race for the Senate. It was while I was working as a reporter for the Chronicle. Mr. Johnson has always been a very energetic, active man who got around the state a great deal, and as a working newspaper reporter I think that just about everyone did meet him.

This might be a good place to put in a little historical relationship between he and my uncle. My uncle had gotten to know Mr. Johnson when he was a young congressman in Washington, and I think was quite well thought of by the Roosevelt family. He'd gotten to know him then and, so far as I know, thought very well of him. In Mr. Johnson's first race for the Senate he was very narrowly defeated by W. Lee O'Daniel, this was during the war, and by a parcel of votes coming in maybe unusually late--I don't know about that, I wasn't here--from East Texas. Mr. Johnson, I think, considered contesting this race. My uncle told me that he actually talked to him about it; I presume he talked to him in his capacity as publisher of the Chronicle. My uncle advised him not to, advised him that it

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was very difficult to overturn an election, that it would be better for him to go on ahead and take it and run again in 1948. He thought that he could win. Mr. Johnson has never confirmed this to me, but I imagine he did.

M: Did your uncle support Lyndon Johnson in that 1941 [race]?

J: 1948?

M: 1941.

J: I do not know. I presume that he did, because I don't think he ever had too great a regard for Mr. O'Daniel, but I don't know. He may have taken no position, I don't know.

M: I have read in some of the books that there was a sort of a political struggle between your uncle and Sam Rayburn in 1940 in regard to the presidential race, and that Mr. Jones was more in favor of Garner, not realizing that FDR would run again. And he got into sort of a contest with Sam Rayburn over this. Do you have any insight into that?

J: No, I have very little insight into this, other than a few things my uncle has mentioned to me. I think they are probably in Timmons' book about him, I'm not sure. But I know that my uncle did not know that President Roosevelt was going to run for a third term, and he, I think, did rather like John Nance Garner. I know that when Mr. Roosevelt did elect to run for the third term my uncle supported Mr. Roosevelt. He was somewhat embarrassed because a number of his Texas friends were on what they called the Texas Regulars, and while he may have been sentimentally tied to some of the Texas

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Regulars, actually politically he was in the Roosevelt Administration, and as such supported President Roosevelt. He and Sam Rayburn did have some very pointed disagreements from time to time.

M: Yes, I believe they had a disagreement over Wallace as vice presidential candidate, too. The reason I mention this is that there is apparently a close connection between Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn.

J: I think there is.

M: If your uncle and Sam Rayburn had gotten into a fight, it might have had some influence on the relationship between your uncle and Lyndon Johnson. [This] is the only reason I brought this up.

J: It very well could have. He never discussed this with me. He did not support Lyndon Johnson in 1948.

M: He did not?

J: No.

M: Why not?

J: He supported Coke Stevenson at this time.

M: Oh, he did?

J: He went into the campaign--he discussed with me that he thought very seriously of supporting Mr. Johnson. He felt he would make a good senator, felt that he had the experience. Early in the campaign Mr. Johnson's local campaign manager said a few things which rather infuriated Mr. Jones.

M: Were these in the nature of a personal insult, or was it a political stand or something of that nature?

J: I've forgotten exactly what it was right now.

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- M: But nonetheless, there was a [clash]?
- J: I mean, it was not the person of Lyndon Johnson so much as it was his local campaign manager.
- M: I see. So your uncle then supported Coke Stevenson?
- J: Supported Coke Stevenson.
- M: And again there was a close race.
- J: Again an extremely close race.
- M: Johnson won by, what, eighty seven votes?
- J: Yes, I think that was it.
- M: Did your uncle have any advice for Johnson then?
- J: I don't think that he was asked for any advice. (Laughter)
- M: Did you meet Lyndon Johnson personally during this campaign? Was that when you first met him?
- J: I don't know. Prior to this campaign I hadn't met him; I'm not sure that I met him during the campaign.

At this time I was fairly active in the state Democratic Party. My wife comes from a family that has been long active in state politics, and she and I were both delegates to the Brownwood [?] convention, we were delegates to the Fort Worth convention.

- M: What was her maiden name?
- J: Her maiden name was Winifred Small. Her father was Clint Small, who was for a long time state senator from the Panhandle and made two unsuccessful races for the governorship.

In fact, both of us were delegates to the Democratic convention in Fort Worth in 1948. Let's see, you could say we were Coke Stevenson delegates.

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This is the convention where the Johnson forces took the convention, and the Stevenson forces were asked to leave the hall and did. You had Jack Porter and a few Republicans outside the door soliciting, too.

M: That must have been a rather bitter experience then for you.

J: Yes. In retrospect, it's okay.

M: Is that just the nature of Texas politics, to work like that?

J: Well, it's always been a little hurly-burly.

M: Yes. Have the Chronicle and the Jones interests supported Lyndon Johnson in any of his campaigns?

J: Yes.

M: I mean after 1948 when he ran again? Did the Chronicle support him then in 1960?

J: In 1960?

M: The presidential race, when Johnson was on the vice presidential ticket.

J: I guess we did. Wait a minute. Who ran? Kennedy and Johnson?

M: Kennedy and Johnson against Nixon.

J: Against Nixon. I can't remember. I think we did. We would have supported him. I think we supported him. I can look that up.

M: That can be checked. Any historian working would have access to this paper's files.

J: I know we did in 1964 and after I left the Chronicle at the end of 1968.

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M: Do you have any impressions about Lyndon Johnson, from your position as a newspaperman, as to Johnson's capabilities as a politician?

J: I think he is a tremendous politician; one of the greatest ones, as a pure politician, I must say. My uncle sometimes talked about the man he thought was the greatest politician in the world. He said he thought it was Franklin Roosevelt, the greatest politician this country had ever had, pure politics, and that Lyndon Johnson maybe wasn't as good but was certainly in the same category in that he had a real political sense. You've got to have this, you know, to be a real top government leader.

M: Has he, in your opinion, been good or bad for Texas? Or somewhere in between?

J: I think that in many ways he's been good for Texas. He went through a period of great national unpopularity when he was probably bad for the state, but this is a rather transitory thing which I think is already pretty much going away. I think in the main history will show that he has been very good for the state.

M: Was he effective in working in state politics? There's been some criticism that Lyndon Johnson as a national figure did not have as much influence over state politics as he might have had. Is there any truth in that?

J: Understand now, recently mine has been a much more constricted viewpoint than it was when I was with the newspaper and had more resources. I would say that at the time I was with the paper that Senator Johnson, and later President Johnson, had greater influence nationally

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than on the local scene, substantially greater. He probably had greater stature nationally. I mean, you can't go through two campaigns as close and as bitter as 1948 and 1941 without leaving a few wounds, and the 1948 one was particularly rough.

M: Was he able to organize the Democratic Party in Texas for his support and under his control? Was he ever able to do that?

J: I don't think he's ever been able to organize it as effectively as some of our governors have.

M: Do you remember anything about the 1956 state fight between the Johnson and Rayburn people and Allan Shivers? Did you have anything to do with that?

J: 1956? What did that fight involve?

M: Shivers had apparently taken the state Democratic Party to the support of Eisenhower in 1952, and he was proposing to do the same thing in 1956. Apparently there was a political struggle within the state at several conventions, one in the spring, one in the fall, in which the Rayburn-Lyndon Johnson people took control of the state party away from the Shivers people. This involved some controversy, and it involved some rather bitter struggles between the Johnson people and some of the Houston liberals under Frankie Randolph. I was wondering if you remembered anything about that struggle?

J: I remember it, difficult parting. At this time the newspaper was supporting Mr. Eisenhower for re-election.

M: Have you ever had occasion to go to a social gathering sponsored by the Johnsons? Were you ever invited to the White House to a White

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House dinner, or [did you] go to any of the political rallies in the state when the Johnsons were present?

J: Oh, yes. We've been invited up to the Ranch a couple of times. Myself and my wife have been invited to the White House at least once or twice. When Mr. Johnson was vice president we were his guests once or twice. That picture on the wall over there was taken at the Bayou Club here in Houston not long ago.

M: The color photograph?

J: Yes.

M: Which shows Lyndon Johnson and you--

J: And my wife.

M: And your wife.

J: And the person half-hidden is Congressman Bob Eckhardt.

M: Yes. What was that occasion?

J: It was a party. I've forgotten who sponsored it. Really, it was to welcome John Connally to Houston.

M: This was just recent then?

J: This was after Mr. Johnson left office, and the President and Mrs. Johnson flew down for the occasion. It was a surprise to everybody, and everybody was delighted. And they obviously had a fine time.

M: I see another picture signed by Lyndon Johnson up there.

J: That was taken up at Johnson City. That is very, very shortly after he had assumed the presidency after the assassination of President Kennedy.

M: What was the occasion of that meeting?

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J: Mr. Gus Wortham and I had gone up to see him about something. I've forgotten what it was.

M: Now this may sound like an impertinent question, but this is the nature of my work so I have to ask it. Did Lyndon Johnson, either as a congressman or as a senator, or a vice president or a president for that matter, ever solicit the support of the Chronicle for a particular policy? Did he ever pick up the phone and call you and say, "John, I need your help on this. Will you support me editorially?" say, for a particular policy? Was there ever an occasion like that?

J: Yes, of course.

M: Can you tell me specifically what these were? I'm curious, in other words, about how does a politician get public support.

J: I think he called me on several occasions on matters which he felt were very, very important. I don't recall any occasion that he called me when he was president. Maybe once on a matter which he felt was going to be very, very tight in House passage, and he called to see if I could help him influence Bob Casey.

M: But is that done through a newspaper? If he'd call you up and say, "Can you help me on this?", would you respond through an editorial or would you respond by picking up your phone and personally contacting Bob Casey?

J: Well, I picked up the telephone and called Bob Casey to tell him about the call and what the President's reasons were on this. I've forgotten what the matter was about. It was something, though,

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which he felt was important enough so that he would make a call to try to swing one Congressional vote. I've forgotten whether this was when he was president or vice president.

M: Did he call you about editorial policies?

J: He didn't call me very much--occasionally. He would call the editor, which is what he should do. He would frequently call the editor, whether the editor was Emmett Walter or later whether it was Bill Steven. He was particularly close on a telephone basis with Bill Steven and used to call him either directly, which he did many times, or through Jack Valenti.

M: Then your people would decide whether they would do it or not?

J: Steven would come in and talk to me, and we'd decide what we were going to do. Responses in this way usually came up in the form of editorials.

M: Is this a normal procedure with politicians? Do they often call newspaper offices and editorials to gain support?

J: I think that depends entirely on the personality of the politician. Some politicians are extremely proud people and wouldn't think of calling you and asking you for something. They let somebody else do it for them. But others have absolutely no hesitancy about picking up the telephone and calling you directly and asking for your help or asking for your advice.

M: Did you get involved in fund raising and that sort of thing for the Democratic Party?

J: No, only to the extent of being solicited.

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M: Yes. No doubt about that.

Do you have any impressions about the way Mrs. Johnson has played her role as first lady?

J: I think she's played it very well. I have a great deal of admiration for her.

M: I would assume you've had occasion to meet her, too.

J: Oh, yes. I think she helped the President quite a bit. She's a very well organized woman.

M: Do you mean systematic and methodical?

J: She's got an orderly mind.

M: Is she intelligent?

J: I think so.

M: Is Lyndon Johnson intelligent?

J: Lyndon Johnson? Yes. I don't know whether you would call it just intelligence. He's got a very, very orderly political mind. Intelligent, certainly, but it's a little bit more than that.

M: It's a rather complex mind.

J: Yes. I'd say it's extremely complex. I mean, he's in a business where you get upbraided all the time, yet he's very sensitive about this sort of thing.

M: Now I've heard this on a number of occasions, that he is supersensitive to criticism, both good and bad.

J: He's very responsive to criticism, put it that way, extremely responsive. And I'm sure that like anybody he likes praise, too.

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M: Yes, certainly. Have you ever had occasion to have him respond to something in your newspaper about him in the way of criticism, either good or bad?

J: I'm trying to remember. I think maybe a time or two when he was senator he might have read a story coming out of the Washington bureau which he felt was inaccurate or reflected on him in some way which was improper.

M: He didn't hesitate to tell you about this?

J: No. He shouldn't have. If that's the way he felt, that's the way he should have expressed himself. Here again, the principal contact was with the editor.

M: If I asked you what his faults were as well as his virtues, what would you say? What are the virtues? Or what are the faults, start with that, of Lyndon Johnson?

J: Faults. Well, he's human like everybody, so he's got a lot of them. I would say maybe this sensitivity could be construed as a fault. He's a very possessive man.

M: What do you mean "possessive"?

J: That's an impression of him, an extremely possessive man. He likes to be right on top of everything himself.

M: He likes to personally control.

J: Yes. I think he's maybe somewhat jealous of this control. These are not attributes of pettiness either; these are attributes of a pretty big man. I think that, having grown up as a boy and a young man who had very, very little, he during his early life was

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acquisitive. He wanted possessions, personal possessions, and he never wanted to be exposed to the hardship or deprivation that he had as a younger man. Certainly he is a brilliant businessman, and he has surrounded himself with some extremely good businessmen who have given him the means for him to follow public life. Of course, as anyone must who has been in the public as he has been, he likes to dominate the group, dominate the situation.

M: Have you had any connection with KTBC, the station in Austin?

J: Only as a listener. Well, they have fed us occasionally. All that's Austin material.

M: On the other side of the coin, has he got any virtues?

J: Lyndon Johnson? Yes, certainly.

M: In your opinion, what?

J: All right, he has a very, very pronounced sense of loyalty to his friends. He has a real dedication, I think, to public service. How much this dedication to public service is mixed up with self-approbation and things like that I don't know. I'm not a psychologist and don't profess to be. I think when he went into the presidency he went in determined to be the best president that he and the Lord knew how to be. I think that that's what he tried to do, and I think that history will show he probably did a pretty good job.

M: You don't doubt his sincerity?

J: In the presidency? No. I think he's a trader in a business way. He does a lot of trading. As such you've got to dissimilate a

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a great deal, and this may have been one of his characteristics early in political life. As president I think that he responded to the office just like any dedicated, patriotic American would.

M: Let me conclude this with an open ended question. Is there anything in your relationship with Lyndon Johnson or Texas politics that ought to be mentioned that hasn't come up?

J: No, I can't think of anything. Actually, my contact with President Johnson has not been too great. It's mostly been at a distance and as an observer more than anything else. The actual contacts we have had have been more social than political. In the case of a newspaper president politicians may feel the two lap, they blend, but we have been together on more social occasions than we have for political occasions.

M: Have the social occasions been generally pleasant?

J: Yes, very.

M: He's a cordial, garrulous, talkative host?

J: Yes. He's a good host.

M: Good. I have no more questions for you, and I thank you for your time.

J: You're more than welcome.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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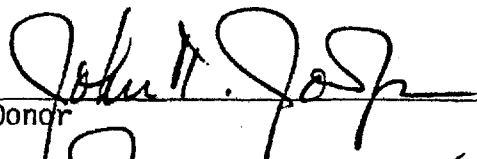
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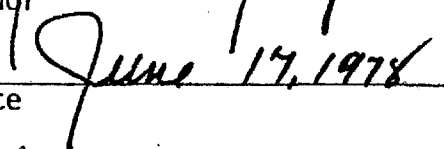
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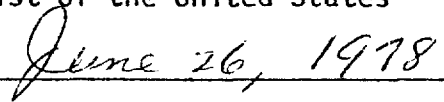
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