

INTERVIEW I

DATE: February 2, 1979
INTERVIEWEE: VAL M. KEATING
INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE
PLACE: LBJ Library, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: Mrs. Keating, let's start with your background. Are you from Texas?

K: Well, that's a story in itself. I've lived in Texas since about 1929 or 1930. When I say a story in itself, it's because of a personal thing that it reminds me of. When I was given the position of director of social services of the Texas Relief Commission the new board did not care to have me in the position and they so told Adam [R.] Johnson, who was brand-new as the state director. He later, many months later, told me that he asked them why they didn't want me in that position, so that he would have a basis for releasing me. The three reasons that he reported to me were that I was not a Texan, I was a woman, and I was a Catholic. He said that he responded to them, "She is a Texan; she's from El Paso. She is a woman; I can't do anything about that. Yes, she's a Catholic, but by so-and-so"--he was a great cusser--"I don't have to pray with her." I held the job from beginning to end.

G: Did you grow up in El Paso?

K: No, I came directly from New York City, but I was raised in St. Paul, Minnesota.

G: You were with the Texas Relief Commission then for a good while before Lyndon Johnson came on the scene?

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K: That's right. I was with the Texas Relief Commission from the time Lawrence Westbrook, who is mentioned there, [pointing to a list handed by the interviewer] left as state director. He was followed by Marie Dresden, who was followed by Adam Johnson. I was given Marie Dresden's former job of state director of social services when she became state director. When she left and Adam Johnson became director was when it was suggested to him that I not be retained. I was supposed to be kind of--what did they call it?--insidious. They told Mr. Johnson I was the most insidious force on the state staff.

G: Why were you insidious?

K: I wasn't. They were the ones that made the charge, I suppose because I spoke out rather clearly on a good many subjects that weren't necessarily pleasant to them.

G: Do you want to elaborate on the subjects?

K: No, I'd like to get to the subject of the discussion, namely Lyndon Johnson.

G: Do you remember the first time you met him?

K: I won't say for sure. I would say that I believe that it was in a staff meeting of the Works Progress Administration which later was named Work Projects Administration in the state office in the Smith-Young Tower in San Antonio. That's my first memory of meeting him. At the time I was still the state director of social service of the Texas Relief Commission with an office in the Littlefield Building in Austin, where I spent three days a week and I was the state director of intake and certification of the Work Projects Administration, with headquarters in San Antonio for the other three days of the week. I

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held the dual position at the recommendation of Harry Hopkins and Aubrey Williams, while the FERA [Federal Emergency Relief Administration] program, which in Texas was administered by the Texas Relief Commission, was being tapered out. It later, as you know, became the State Department of Public Welfare, and WPA was the job I was to go to full time, but for approximately six months I held both jobs on a three-day/three-day basis. So I don't remember the capacity I was in when I met Lyndon. I assume it was one of the days I was in San Antonio on the WPA staff, because that's where the meeting was being held. I would say, offhand, that probably Jesse Kellam was with him. I'm sure that Lyndon was the state director of the National Youth Administration. I would think that maybe Jesse [was with him]; I know he came to later meetings with him.

G: What was Lyndon Johnson like in those days?

K: He was a tall, slender, handsome, outspoken, energetic, at some points brash, young man.

G: Can you recall anything specific that typified these traits? For example, you say brash.

K: Well, he and Mr. [Harry] Drought did not always see eye to eye. Mr. Drought was an older, more experienced person, a very close friend of Cactus Jack [Garner]. Lyndon was impatient and wanted things to move very fast. Mr. Drought was heavy on protocol, on the legal aspects of public administration. Naturally, in administration you can see that the two might not approach public administration in exactly the same way. Sometimes Lyndon showed his impatience when it might have gotten results a little faster if he had been able to hold his enthusiasm just a bit.

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G: Are you thinking of something specific here?

K: Well, not exactly specific, but Mr. Drought would always want to go through channels and be very, very careful about all of the policy and law aspects of the program. Lyndon, if there was a chance to move faster than that, [would] break through the formalities. In a staff meeting, many staff meetings, they would just have little head-on differences of opinion.

G: I gather that he went down to San Antonio and met with Harry Drought early on, the first week or so he was down there.

K: Yes.

G: And that one of the crucial issues early on was whether or not the NYA would be an adjunct under the WPA or whether it would be more independent, autonomous.

K: Well, based on the federal program, it had to be autonomous. They were two separate laws, two separate appropriations, but because their purposes were so closely related there had to be very close working relationships for the best to come out of both programs as they impinged on youth. The demarcation between the programs was therefore not always perfectly clear. When it wasn't perfectly clear, when you had one more formal person and one less formal person working against a line that isn't clear, you would naturally at times run into differences of point of view as to how to do it. Neither ever, that I know anything about, showed any disinclination to help the poor people get jobs and both had high standards as far as quality was concerned. In that I never saw

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any difference of opinion, but [it] was more in the method of arriving at what they agreed was an almost identical goal. But the path wasn't always as clear to one as it was to the other as to which way to go or what to emphasize.

G: Did you, yourself, ever serve as an intermediary?

K: Many times.

G: Really. Can you remember in particular any of them and the circumstances?

K: What I remember was that since I appeared to have the confidence of both of them, I tried very hard when they would ask my opinion of something to explain one of them to the other and vice versa. The explanations made to Lyndon were usually made in the Littlefield Building in my office on the sixth floor. He would come from his office, which was also in the Littlefield Building--I forget what floor; I just remember my own--and we would have heart-to-heart talks about how to reach certain goals. Though I think I was only five or six years older than Lyndon, I would try to keep him calm.

The other three days of the week when I was in San Antonio, if I had the opportunity and Mr. Drought asked my opinion about something, I always tried to throw my weight, fix my opinion, in favor of the things that Lyndon was working toward and trying to mitigate the little friction points and keep the eye on the jointness of their interests.

G: Can you relate this to a particular issue or question or project?

K: Oh, it never came to a project. Mr. Drought didn't get into. . . .

G: Or how about a policy or an issue?

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K: Well, there was one--I wouldn't have thought of it in a hundred years if I hadn't seen an item on here [again pointing to the interviewer's list]. Mr. Drought was anxious for the state NYA office to be moved from Austin to San Antonio. I had forgotten it. But that was one, Lyndon didn't want to go. Mr. Drought wanted him to come.

G: Why did he want him to come?

K: Well, we worked so closely he wanted him to be near. But it didn't occur to him, or at least if it occurred he didn't give it affirmative thought, for him to do the moving to Austin, which was the state capital, because his home and his interests were San Antonio, and that's where the WPA state office was set up.

G: He was from an old San Antonio family, wasn't he?

K: Yes indeed, a very old, highly reputable family in civic, cultural, political and legal affairs.

G: Do you think that LBJ's desire to stay in Austin was perhaps a measure of independence, to keep a distance between [the WPA and NYA]?

K: It could easily be. Without taking a count on it, I'd say that probably most of the other state NYA offices were in the state capital. In the other states, many of them, the ones I happen to know about, were in the state capital. It was sort of a natural thing, too, because there were other organizations to work with, such as the state employment commission. It had its state headquarters in Austin, cater-cornered from our Littlefield Building. So there were good reasons.

G: Were these the arguments that he used?

K: Oh, I don't remember.

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G: My impression is that this issue didn't come up until 1936.

K: It didn't. It didn't come into the foreground, didn't become a real issue till then.

G: Do you think that Lyndon Johnson just came down from Washington and moved to Austin and set up the office there, or was there ever initially a consideration that they might have the office in San Antonio.

K: I do not know that. I think it was just the most natural thing in the world for the people in the Washington office to tell their state directors to go set up an office in the state capital. That was the pattern, really.

G: I gather that in other states, though, the NYA would actually become a subordinate of the WPA.

K: No.

G: Really?

K: No, not that I know of. [They had] very close working relationships but never subordinated that I know of.

G: Even in Texas I gather the WPA district supervisors would try to fire or get the NYA personnel fired if they didn't go along with certain things. Do you remember any examples?

K: Well, now if they did that they were totally out of order, and they would have been in just as good order to have tried to get somebody fired from the state treasurer's office. They had no more jurisdiction than that. There were no joint considerations of personnel. There was no policy under which we both had to be happy about Joe Doakes.

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G: You don't recall then Harry Drought supporting one of his supervisors and trying to get one of the NYA people that was in the field out of the area?

K: I do not. That's one that didn't come back to me in any of your notes nor in my memory. That doesn't mean it didn't happen. I was pretty busy about other things.

G: I don't see it here either. I do have some notes on it.

K: I'm not saying it's not here. I'm saying, if it was there it didn't ring a bell with me.

G: I gather that one of the real problems of the NYA was finding youths who qualified and who could be properly certified.*

K: That's right, and that I was very deeply involved in.

G: Would you talk about that?

K: Yes, I'd be glad to. We had a very small staff of social workers in each district office. Those workers, as one of their many responsibilities, were to help to get young men and women referred to the National Youth Administration. They sometimes failed to do it, and when they did [fail] Lyndon would talk to me about it and I would try to get at the bottom of it.

Now this happened particularly--and there is a memorandum in your files in the Library [on this subject]. When the Texas Relief Commission was petering out, as I told you, they, with their families that they were giving assistance to, meager as it was, were supposed to keep their eyes open for likely boys and girls who could be referred for training or for work on NYA projects as a means toward helping support the family.

* 10/5/79 V.K. suggests referring to the LBJ Library collections, NYA, Box 8, Folder 1/35-1/36.

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There is a memorandum in the files downstairs that is an example of one of my efforts to get the staff to give this procedure emphasis.* I was very much surprised a year ago when I saw it. I had naturally completely forgotten it and saw my name staring at me and it was a rather severe memo. At least it was understandable, let's say. Before it left the Texas Relief Commission office, State Director Adam Johnson wrote on the bottom of it--and it is there, his handwriting--minimizing my effort, saying in effect, "This is harsher than it really should be. We know you're worked to death, and just do what you can." He didn't tell them not to do it, but he took a little of the pressure [off] that I was trying to put on it. If that's a point, and I see it is a point in your outline, I think you might want to see that because it would not be a matter of memory. It is a matter of record, which to me is a lot better basis for knowing what the facts were than digging around in an old lady's mind concerning something that happened thirty or forty years ago.

G: Did Lyndon Johnson try to expedite the paper work that would enable him to get people assigned quicker and get projects going more rapidly?

K: I certainly don't think that he would ever have held off a minute of it. I can't answer your question because I wasn't in their organization. But I'd lay my bottom dollar on the fact that he certainly did do everything he possibly could.

G: You must have spent a lot of time talking with him about the NYA and his own views of it. What do you think motivated him as state director?

K: Well, I really believe that he was very deeply interested in young people, and he knew that a lot of young people at that time were in serious need

*Dated January 25, 1936. Subject "Selection of youths for Employment" from Val M. Keating with footnote from Adam R. Johnson.

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of food and clothing and shelter, and that he thought that the NYA program as conceived by the federal government was a means of helping some of them.

When I saw in your outline a question or an item about whether he used or conceived--I forget what the word was--of NYA as kind of a pool of future political support, I do not know. It never passed his lips with me. Maybe that was one of my naive spots, because I was a graduate social worker at the time myself and that wasn't what I was thinking of. He'd have to have been pretty clear about it for me to have understood it, I guess.

G: Did you have any insight into his relations with his staff?

K: Only this, that his regional staff--I forget the titles that they were known by--were devoted to him, that they were loyal to a man. I don't remember that there were any women. I maybe should have gotten after him about that. But they were loyal absolutely. I never heard of any kind of friction of any sort. I can't shed any light on that, anything except that the spirit of it--and I was in many meetings with them--was complete loyalty and a great deal of affection.

G: How about the national office people like Aubrey Williams and Dick Brown? Did you get an opportunity to see how they functioned with Lyndon Johnson?

K: I didn't know Dick Brown well. I knew Aubrey Williams very well. He came to Texas and gave an institute at Camp Waldemar while I was in the county welfare department in El Paso County, and I attended the institute. From then on we were close friends. He, many times, spoke of Lyndon as quote, close quote, "Our boy Lyndon. How's our boy Lyndon doing?" but always in a very

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affirmative way. I remember seeing pictures of them together in Washington, not in a solely official picture like that [pointing to a picture by the interviewer], but much more informal and friendly. I know that in the Washington office Lyndon was considered to be one of their good, peppy, strong administrators.

G: Do you think he had difficulty administering a program in a state as large and spread out as Texas was?

K: Well, anybody, any human being [would have], let's put it that way, the answer would have to be yes to that. Nobody could do that job without having tremendous problems, I'm sure.

G: How would he compensate for that?

K: That I can't say, because with his own staff working hours and hours and hours overtime, all you could sense about it was that everybody was doing the very best they could. It just didn't come to your mind to think about it. At least it didn't come to my mind to think about that.

G: I see from the files that he seems to have been very concerned with the efficiency of the operation and avoiding any scent of corruption, and very concerned with how much it cost to put a girl or boy to work. Was this a [concern]?

K: Oh, that good management quality was there, as you would hope it would be in all public officials.

G: But on the other hand he seems to have had an extreme eagerness to get these things done. Did the two of them ever collide?

K: If they did, I don't know. I'd think one would support the other. My experience has been that if you have that first quality you're more likely

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to attain the second one. If you're slap-happy about costs and procedures and policy you aren't as likely to get where you want to go as if you're pretty tight about them.

G: Did you advise Lyndon Johnson on employment of women in projects?

K: No. I had nothing to do with advising on women as women. He would have consulted, if he did--and I'd be very surprised if he didn't--with the director of women's projects, Mary K. Taylor, on that particular subject. My responsibility, as it related to NYA, was in seeking out from the people who were either receiving assistance or in dire need of it, poor people in other words, young men and women, and getting them called to the attention of NYA in order that they would see if they had either classes or projects, depending on the person's individual characteristics, to which that person could appropriately be assigned. It was more the getting the person from the assistance roll, relief we called it, to the NYA payroll. It was trying to help select what seemed to be likely potentials, get them over there for them to decide whether they were or not, and if so, where to put them. But with operation of a project or types of projects, no, I had nothing to do with it.

G: What was his attitude toward blacks on NYA projects?

K: I never thought he had an attitude. I mean, maybe I saw what I wanted to see, but I always felt that he was dealing with boys and girls, human beings. I couldn't tell you that he had an attitude for or against yellow, brown, black, white, anybody. From what I came to know later I would have reason to believe that at that point he had no less than we'll

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say [what] you would have expected in 1936 and 1937 of someone raised in Texas. I believe, in other words, on that subject he was a mature person.

G: What about his attitude toward publicity? Did you get a chance to see how he utilized publicity?

K: Oh, I think he, like all agencies, had concern with a good image for his organization and for himself, as far as that's concerned, with the public. I don't remember that he had, like we had in WPA, a really public relations or information-type service that was solely related to that. He may have and I needn't have known it. It might never have come up.

G: He developed an advisory committee, a group of distinguished businessmen and leaders who served as an advisory committee for the state NYA. Do you remember that?

K: No. I was interested when I saw a note in your notes to the effect of why was Mr. Wirtz not on the committee or some such, and I was trying to think. But he could easily have had one and that not have been my concern or interest.

G: Did you know Alvin Wirtz then?

K: No. No, I don't know him now.

G: Let's look at some of the projects. Do any of them stand out in your mind of being particularly noteworthy? Do they trigger any particular memories?

K: Well, of course what triggers a memory--thank the Lord he's still living, the architect for this chapel in Denton. . . . He's a San Antonio man. That was considered one of the very finest types of projects that people

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could be assigned to because it had some depth and some meaning and some continuity. It's still the place where the kids at Denton want to be married. It's still one of the prettiest little spots in North Texas. I don't recall anything special about it except that when they chose the architect--and maybe at that time he was in need, I don't know anything about it. He has become one of the outstanding architects in Texas.

G: Was it O'Neil Ford?

K: That's right, O'Neil Ford. Neil we called him. He was the architect. Well, it would be a feather in his cap if he did it today, much less when he was such a young man.

There wasn't what I would call a shortage [of youths]. There was this difficulty in making the selection and then fitting them into what was available to do, the kind of thing that they could develop. See, they had to get support from the counties. They had to have cooperation fiscal-wise. I probably wouldn't word the problem just like that.

G: I think here what he had reference to when he said there was a shortage of eligible youths was rather that it was a problem of finding youths who qualified, getting the word out to them that these programs existed.

K: Well, that could easily be true, because for instance, the Texas Relief Commission had as its only source of looking for people, the people who had come to it for money for food and commodities, as we called them in those days. They didn't have a broad responsibility for all of the poor in the state of Texas. They only had the ones that found their way to their door. There were many others around that we all knew were there

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that nobody had any official record of them. We knew they were there, but they didn't get into the program.

G: I guess one of the issues was maybe the WPA felt that it was most important to get the head of the family back to work and the breadwinner. Of course, LBJ's concern was with the youths.

K: That's right.

G: Do you think there was an inherent conflict here in what would come first or what should come first?

K: If there was, there shouldn't have been. There shouldn't have been any. I know of no reason why it would. I certainly can't say that it didn't happen, because I don't know everything that happened.

G: Do you remember the junior placement service in Fort Worth? I think that was discontinued after a while, the job placement service.

K: No, I don't remember that.

G: How about the roadside parks? Do you remember them?

K: Oh, sure. That was also something that people were behind that they liked, that they approved of it.

G: You don't recall the genesis of that program, do you?

K: No, I don't. Now I saw you had a name here and you had asked me if I knew him and I didn't. [Gibb Gilchrist] No, I had no knowledge of this. I just know it was one of the kinds of projects that you never heard people complain about. You never heard people say, "Well, they're wasting our money or wasting our time." It was a well-accepted and good project.

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G: Anything else on Lyndon Johnson and the NYA, any episodes that you remember?

K: Well, if I could just glance through this. It seems to me some bells rang. Oh, I know the name of that street that you've got a blank there. It was Bob Montgomery's house. The Johnsons lived in it while Bob and his wife were in Washington; Bob was on a Washington assignment from the University [of Texas] at the time. I had dinner there. I can picture the house. It's out here in that pretty wooded area before you get to Shoal Creek.

G: Was it San Gabriel or San Pedro, one of the two?

K: I ran across that in the materials upstairs, too, but I can't remember it now.

J. Evetts Haley is still at it, a critical newspaper article. I just saw one the other day.

G: Did you get to know Mrs. Johnson during this period?

K: No, only at dinner that one night. Lyndon invited Francoise Black, who was one of my assistants. I believe Jesse was there and probably Bill Deason and maybe one or two others, about eight of us were at dinner. Otherwise, no. I've been at so many meetings here in the Library and at the Center where she's been. I've often wanted to just say hello but I don't believe in breaking through a line to try to do things like that. I would like to know her. [I have] great respect for everything I hear.

Well, now this question: "Did NYA awaken LBJ to real poverty and to the problem of lacking black economic opportunity, to an interest in park conservation?" Well, I can't say whether it awakened him, but I

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think it certainly sharpened his concern for real poverty. And I think this letter that I have--yesterday I was telling you I wanted to get a date. I had this date in mind because I wanted to see if there was anything related to that date and there wasn't. I think there might even be a sentence or so that bears on that question. Well, you read it. I think when you get to this paragraph it will bear on that question*

G: This is a good letter.

K: Oh, I had many.

G: February 2, 1939.

K: I wanted to see if there was anything in that period that was going on at that time that would make him want to think back and write that kind of a thing.

G: Do you recall anything in particular about the school aid program of enabling students to stay in school on various projects?

K: Not specifically. I remember he was always tremendously interested in the San Marcos school project, but that specific part of the program I won't say that I really do remember. Now, of course, La Villita is another example of just wonderful imagination that went into it. Of course, Maury Maverick helped and WPA did a lot of the other things along the river. The Arneson Theater and the walks and all were WPA. See, those were things that we were working right almost in the same territory, so there were naturally many interests that he and Mr. Drought would have as to who did what and who did the other. But that was certainly another of the imaginative [projects].

*2/2/39 letter attached

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G: Do you think that Lyndon Johnson and Harry Drought developed a better working relationship and mutual appreciation after they had gone through this NYA experience? I mean, did their relations improve as time went on?

K: Oh, I don't think their relations were ever so bad that you'd just be looking for improvement. I think each had quite a bit of respect for the other. It was just that they were such completely different people. Their background, their age, their interests, their whole personalities were so different. I think some years after the two programs were over, [that] if somebody asked Mr. Drought about Lyndon he'd say, "Oh, that dear boy. Wasn't he just. . . ." I know that when Lyndon did go to Congress Mr. Drought was just delighted, no question about that. I know that when I went to see Lyndon in his offices, I told Mr. Drought that I was going to, because I didn't want any reverberations or anything about it. After that program was over, and I was with what's now the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, I always told my bosses what I did, or was going to do if I knew ahead of time, so they wouldn't have any surprises. I know that Mr. Drought was just delighted when I remember telling him socially, even after the program was over, about lunch and who Lyndon brought to meet me as his guest.

G: Who was that, may I ask?

K: Well, Sam Rayburn was one, and a couple of younger men. He didn't make any fuss about it. He just said, "Well, I want you to meet--" And so I remember telling Mr. Drought. [He said,] "Mr. Sam! Well, I'm so glad!" He was glad that Lyndon was in a position where he was able to introduce

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[me]. He held no [bad feelings]. I mean, in my opinion, I don't know what was in his heart.

G: Do you recall when you first learned that LBJ was going to run for Congress?

K: No, I can't say I recall when I first learned. No, I can't. Now, by any chance, was he still in uniform when he [ran]?

G: No, no, this was before. [James P.] Buchanan died in 1937.

K: Oh, that's right, that's right. No, no, no. I don't remember any firsts about it at all.

G: Do you recall if he had a continuing involvement in the NYA after he was elected to Congress?

K: Well, NYA was over.

G: Well, not until, what, 1943?

K: Yes, 1942. I don't remember that he had an involvement in the [NYA]. You mean like in the federal program as a program?

G: Continuing interest in the Texas NYA. Did he continue to look in on its progress?

K: I couldn't answer that. I would just know, knowing him, that of course he did. I just would rely on him that he couldn't possibly let anything like that drop, but to say that I know specifically, no.

G: I don't mean to confine you to the things that I've mentioned. I'm hoping that you will offer any perspectives and memories that you have here.

K: Well, I don't know that I really do. Because after going to see Lyndon that time and hearing from him a number of times, when I went with the

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federal department--now Health, Education and Welfare, Social Security then--I made it a point not to keep in any contact, because I did not want to be considered any kind of a go-between. At that point we didn't have an official relationship and I was not about to use any previous friendship or administrative relationship later. Now naturally I watched, you know, what he voted for and against and things like that, but I didn't keep close.

I remember one kind of thing. I don't see how it can bear on this, but I think of it because George Weaver's interview is in the material upstairs. Mr. Weaver is a black man who was very close to Lyndon throughout. He has held positions with the international labor group. He still does many government errands. His wife was a social worker with the agency I worked with, so I was in their home many times. George's den was just covered with pictures. I'd look around and say, "You don't know anybody but Lyndon? Is he the only person in Washington that you know?" Because Lyndon was in almost every one of them. He said that he knew lots of people, but he was kind of choosy and he just made his choices. And we had some little discussion about the way Lyndon had voted on something. Mr. Weaver let me know in no uncertain terms that Lyndon was absolutely 100 per cent their friend, and there was no question how they felt about supporting him because of the way that he reacted to their purposes. That gave me a feeling that it wasn't just that I thought so, because I don't think Mr. Weaver had any ax to grind; he wouldn't have to prove anything to me. But I just remember that feeling of warmth that I had when he said, "Well, no question."

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G: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

K: No, I don't think I do. I don't really think I had anything anyway.

G: Oh, I disagree.

K: It's just kind of fun to think over some of the things.

G: Well, I certainly do thank you.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview 1]

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