

INTERVIEW II

DATE: February 26, 1970  
INTERVIEWEE: JESSE KELLAM  
INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ  
PLACE: Mr. Kellam's office at KTBC-TV, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

- F: Mr. Kellam, first of all, let's talk a bit about your relationship with eventually President Johnson insofar as his major campaigns were concerned. Now I realize that you were connected a good part of that time with the government and therefore could not take part in the campaigns, but you were a long-time friend, which Mr. [Eric] Goldman already has on record, and it's possible that he may have talked with you at some time about his decision to run against Pappy O'Daniel in 1941 and then again, his decision to run against Coke Stevenson in 1948.
- K: About the only firm recollection I have in connection with the 1941 campaign was four or five days after the election and when the Texas Election Bureau made another late return.
- F: It looked as if he had won, didn't it?
- K: It looked that way long enough that, as I remember, the Dallas [Morning] News and a number of papers prior to the Dallas News conceded the election. But late, either four or five days after the election, a report came in that placed Pappy O'Daniel winner by, as I recall, eleven hundred and some-odd votes. There were still some outstanding ballots to be counted.

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Here's the incident I remember. Then-Congressman Johnson turned to someone in the room--there were four or five of us just visiting--

F: Was this out at his house?

K: No, this was elsewhere. [He said], "Would you make me a reservation to return to Washington tomorrow?" I turned to him and said, "You are not even going to contest these late returns?" He said, "Were I to do so and win, I'd lose." That was his attitude there, never entertained a thought of contesting it.

Many, many people remember the margin of victory in 1948; not so many remember the narrow margin of defeat in 1941.

F: I would presume that his associates felt that he had a case in 1941 if he'd chosen to pursue it.

K: Yes. Yes.

F: When you came down to 1948, he had this experience then of what had happened in 1941 in which he had narrowly missed; rightfully or wrongfully is beside the point. Was there much hesitation so far as you know on whether to offer himself, because it meant giving up his congressional seat if he lost again?

K: I was not privy to those deliberations.

F: You were not in on that?

K: No, sir.

F: How did he happen to get into the radio business?

K: Mrs. Johnson had recently come into a trust that had been established by her mother, a twenty-five year trust, and had a few dollars to invest.

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Her husband considered broadcasting a good investment at that time, KTBC became available and Mrs. Johnson purchased it.

F: KTBC was a relatively young station at that time, wasn't it?

K: Yes. Mrs. Johnson made that purchase in 1943 and the station had gone on the air in 1939. It was, when it went on the air, the second station in Austin.

F: I first came to Austin in 1935 and I only remember KNOW from those days.

K: That was the only radio station in Austin in those days. KTBC went on the air, I forget the exact day, but in 1939.

F: When did you come with the station?

K: I started to work at the station in January of 1946 when I returned from the service.

F: Did you advise with Mrs. Johnson on the purchasing of the station?

K: No, no. I was not working for Mrs. Johnson at that time.

F: What was your position when you came to the station in 1946?

K: General manager.

F: Was there ever any conscious policy to promote Congressman Johnson's political ambitions on the part of the station, or did you have a policy of giving equal treatment? You didn't have any equal treatment laws at that time insofar as politics were concerned.

K: Broadcasters, I think, have always had a desire to be fair, and we have been charged at times with leaning over backwards in being fair. I think that there has not been an election that involved the two major parties since I've been at the station but what following the election we either

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received a letter or were told by the county chairman of the Republican Party that, "We appreciate your fairness and your objectivity." On the other hand, I've had a number of Democratic leaders accuse us of leaning over backwards and the result being unfair treatment to the Democratic candidate.

F: I know of course the President has a great interest in the station simply because he does have a financial stake in it, but has he shown a great deal of interest in the internal policy within the station, or has he pretty well left that to the operators?

K: Not as much I believe as Mrs. Johnson would like for him to show.

F: I see.

K: From the standpoint of a general manager, I would say the working conditions of the station are ideal.

F: He has given you a free rein through the years pretty much?

K: Freer than a general manager likes to have at times. There comes times when you would like for somebody to say "Do" or "Don't do." You do or you don't; you should or you shouldn't. It doesn't take a coward to shy away from decisions at times, the tougher they get.

F: Right. In a case like that, if you've gone to him he's told you to make up your own mind?

K: Well, in the first place I didn't go to him.

F: I see.

K: In the second place--let me digress just a moment. One of the really great men that I have known is the late Senator Alvin Wirtz. When I worked

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for the National Youth Administration, Senator Wirtz was on the advisory board. If I had a problem I'd go to Senator Wirtz and I'd say, in effect, "Tell me how to decide this." Never once did Senator Wirtz make a decision for me, but never once did I leave a conference with him but what I knew the decision that should be made.

F: He laid out the pros and cons, huh?

K: He helped you to analyze it; he helped you to see your problem and to know the right thing to do. That's always helpful.

F: Incidentally--this is a digression--we interviewed Mrs. Wirtz in Rochester last week.

K: I would love to have been there.

F: I didn't go myself, another fellow went and saw Dr. [James] Cain and Mrs. Wirtz.

K: [She's] a lovely woman.

F: Did the President consult with Senator Wirtz on business matters, or were they pretty much just political allies?

K: They were very, very close friends. I don't know all of the things that they discussed with each other, but I do know that each man had a high regard for the other's judgment politically, business judgment. Each appreciated the good qualities of the other. There was a close bond of personal friendship.

F: Where business decisions were necessary, did the President pretty well defer to Mrs. Johnson in this?

K: Mrs. Johnson always made the final decision.

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- F: I presume she has got a fairly tough-minded approach to such problems and there's none of this presumed female sentimentality in her decisions, but they are good, hard business decisions.
- K: She has good, sound business judgment, and can weigh a problem objectively. Mrs. Johnson is not tough; she's realistic and has the ability to look at all sides of a problem and arrive at a decision. She has good judgment, just like her father before her.
- F: When you've gone to her then on something that needed a decision, you have been in the position of laying out all the facets of the problem both pro and con. In other words, she likes to sift evidence.
- K: Right, and she remembers details.
- F: Yes, I've noticed that myself. You don't fake much, do you?
- K: That is correct. One should do their homework before they discuss any subject with Mrs. Johnson because she will have done hers.
- F: Was the President just too busy with politics to take much interest in business, or do you think that that's really not his cup of tea?
- K: Politics was his business and consumed eighteen or twenty hours of his working day. That was his business.
- F: Now the accusation has always been made by his detractors that he was terribly acquisitive and kind of was the money-conscious Texan. Would you say that holds water, or do you think that he looked on the building up of an estate as sort of an incidental?
- K: Rephrase the question. I can't react to that.
- F: What I'm trying to state, not very well, is politics was his main interest.

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It's my impression that any wealth that accrued just sort of came incidentally and was not a primary concern of his.

K: I agree with your statement that politics was his primary interest. Now he looked with favor on Mrs. Johnson going into broadcasting. Once into broadcasting or into any other business, Mr. Johnson would want that business to succeed. If he had been a doctor, an M.D., he would have wanted to have been a good one. If Mrs. Johnson had gotten into automobile manufacturing, he would want it to be successful. He, Mr. Johnson, is a competitor at heart. He likes to be associated with enterprises and people who are successful, be it a domino game or an election or the cattle business.

F: Right now we're aware of him as a competitive librarian. You can see the same thing at work.

K: He would have been a great athlete. He started out in athletics and had an accident and didn't go far with that, and then he had to do a good deal of work when he was in school that's not conducive to [athletics].

F: He played a little first base, didn't he?

K: I believe that's right.

F: Have you played dominoes with him?

K: Yes, sir.

F: Played against him?

K: Yes, sir.

F: Is he a good domino player?

K: Yes, he's above average.

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F: Does he tend to play the sort of quiet, meditative game as so many of these all-out domino players play, or does he keep up that stream of talk that he's known for?

K: He's a conversationalist.

F: So you could distract him perhaps in dominoes.

K: No, he might distract you. He's pretty hard to distract, but he might distract you. (Laughter)

F: How did you happen to decide to go into television? Because that's a major and expensive step and it was newfangled at that time.

K: Yes, I had great reservations about it. We deliberated quite some time. Then when the decision was made--and it was a close decision, very close--to go into television, it meant that the business enterprise was staking its all, which means all it had and all it could borrow, on the success of the venture. It was a very daring venture, because if you'll go back to 1952-53-54, there weren't many people going into television business. We were one of the early ones to go in after the freeze, but we went on a very, very close decision.

F: Did the President express himself on it?

K: Yes. Yes. I don't think he was absolutely sure that it was the thing to do, but there comes a time when you just can't see over the hill. As I look back on it, I'm not sure it was the right thing to do financially, from a financial standpoint. The people who have done real, real well include those broadcasters who stayed out of television and expanded their radio interest. They're the ones who reaped the harvest, because if you'll



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recall, the price of radio stations in 1953-54-55-56 and 57 was very, very depressed. The people who, instead of going into this expensive set-up, television, picked up additional radio stations at the then prevailing prices--

F: Bought bargains.

K: Yes, sir, and made money.

F: Did you talk this over with the other radio stations here in Austin, about going into television?

K: No. As a matter of fact, the day that KTBC got its permit to go into television, a second permit was granted for Austin. That station was not built. That is true of many, many permits in those days. They were granted, but they just didn't proceed to build. No, it was a decision that we had to make, to do or not to do. Not many people wanted to go into it.

F: Now then, as you know, as he grew in national prominence and power, and people looked for some way to cut him down, one of the charges made was that he was running a monopoly here and was preventing anyone else from getting channels. How did you counter this?

K: I didn't. You can't keep people from spreading false rumors, making false statements. As I recalled to you just a moment ago, the day that we got a permit to build a television station here a second permit was granted. I told you that our decision was very, very close, to build or not to build. The other man, much more adequately financed than we were, decided that he could do other things with his money to a greater financial advantage.

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F: Could you tell me who the other person was?

K: Well, it's a matter of record. I don't mind telling you, a gentleman by the name of Coffield got a permit the same day we did.

F: But decided against it.

K: Just didn't build.

F: What happens in a case like that? Does it just lie vacant for a while and then lapse?

K: Eventually they lapse. It is possible, under given conditions, to get an extension on the permit, but the number of times you can get an extension is limited. As a matter of fact, the UHF station that's on the air here now, and has been for some three or four years, the first permit for that channel was granted years and years before the station was ever built.

F: Life magazine came out during the campaign of 1964 showing President Johnson's holdings and putting valuations on them. Did they get that information insofar as KTBC was concerned from the company, or was that just an outside estimate that they made?

K: I do not know where they got their information. They did not get it from me.

F: I see. So possibly they were just guessing what a station like this in their opinion would be worth. Did they contact you on this?

K: No. There's certain information that is available to the general public in the files of the Federal Communications Commission. It's not full and complete, but it is pertinent. They had those files available to them. And then a reasonably smart, cunning writer can take figures and make

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them say nearly anything he wants to, and particularly if he uses a qualifying clause along the line somewhere and if he assumes something.

F: Gives himself an escape hatch.

K: I have no idea where Life got their material.

F: You had those charges that in a sense you had bludgeoned certain people into taking advertising. Was there any substance to that?

K: That's an insult to the individual concerned, as well as to the station. No, of course not.

F: I wanted that on the record.

K: Yes. And I want it on the record that it is not only an insult to the station, it's an insult to the other party involved.

F: How do you make such charges, just make them? Aren't you liable to slander?

K: What did Coach [Darrell] Royal do when he was quoted as having made a derogatory statement about one segment of our population, and having made the statement in New York, whereas in truth and in fact, he was attending a banquet here in Austin, Texas, how did he react to it! Perhaps he had cause for action; as a matter of fact, in my opinion he does and did, but he chose not to pursue it. He got a retraction. I'm not sure the retraction ever catches up with the false charge. A publication within the past thirty days here in Austin listed me as general manager of another radio station in Austin, and then proceeded to list four others of our organization with this other station. I wrote the individual responsible for the publication, said that I hoped he hadn't been sued by this other station; that we planned no suit, but that I did want to bring it

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to his attention. He wrote back and pled guilty and said, "Would you like to have a correction?" to which I replied no. I didn't write him with the intention of a correction, but I did want him to know that in the next issue of the publication he might correct it.

F: During the period when Joe McCarthy was spreading charges around, of course one of the charges was that the press encouraged him and gave him undue publicity, et cetera. Did Mr. Johnson ever show any interest in this insofar as KTBC was concerned?

K: None whatsoever.

J: You went ahead and made your own policy completely?

K: As a matter of fact, at this station even before I came here--Mrs. Johnson had owned it approximately three years before I went to work here--one of first people she hired was Paul Bolton. When I came to the station the news department, unlike most news departments in radio stations in that day and time, was a separate department. It didn't have very many people in the total organization, but news was an independent department, not an arm of programming, as it was throughout the industry as a whole.

Paul Bolton, I'm sure you know, was in 1943 and is still today an individualist. He went to work at KTBC as head of the news department, and it was never changed after I came to the station. News here is still an independent arm and does not operate within the programming department. Management--not ownership; management--establishes broad policies for the news department, and within those broad policies the news editor is an independent operator. We believe, and have all along, that a news

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department to be meaningful and to be a real news department must operate independently of anything else in the organization. You establish policy and then say, "Now you determine news and how to treat it."

F: Have you ever gotten any complaints from the President because of certain things that you showed?

K: Yes, sir.

F: What do you answer in a case like that?

K: In substance the same answer that Paul Bolton gave me in 1947 when we received a telegram that involved a large order. I went back hurriedly to Paul Bolton and said, "Wonderful news! Here's an order for so-and-so and so-and-so." Bolton looked at it and said, "It's wonderful, but it 'tain't news."

(Interruption)

F: Let's talk a little bit, if it's pertinent, about when John Connally and associates went into KVET. They'd all been fairly closely associated with Congressman Johnson at the time, and here they're coming into town setting up against him. Was there any reason for this, other than just a business opportunity?

K: I was one of the ten veterans that was interested in KVET. Broadcasting looked like it might be promising and most of us were fixing to get out of the service and looking for a job. President Johnson reacted as I think maybe any intelligent man would; that as Austin grows, as broadcasting grows, there would be other stations, and "If I've got friends here that want to go into it, I'll help them all I can," which is what

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he did.

F: Was he of any assistance at all in getting a license, or was that called for?

K: About all you had to do to get the license was to apply for it.

F: I presume the relationship between the two stations was just a good, competitive relationship, nothing more.

K: I'd say a good, hard, competitive relationship. I'll put it that way.

F: You didn't mind trying to go after each other's accounts?

K: That is correct.

F: After Mr. Johnson became Senate majority leader and began to be talked about for the presidency, did he ever talk to you, say in 1956, about the possibilities of his getting the nomination? It was the time that Adlai Stevenson was nominated for a second time.

K: Dr. Frantz, I was not and am not a political confidant of President Johnson. I think I have his confidence but I'm not a political confidant. I'll tell you one story, and then you will know that it's fruitless to try to get political information of history out of me.

F: All right.

K: I was sitting in company with President Johnson, who was not then president but Senate majority leader, and one other individual. This other individual was knowledgeable in politics. He asked me a political question and I reacted to it.

F: The other person did?

K: Yes. President Johnson said, "I told you he wasn't hired for his political judgment." (Laughter)

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F: So that closes down that subject.

K: That closes down politics.

F: During the time that he was vice president did you get to Washington much?

K: Just about as usual, about as I have for the past twenty, twenty-five years.

F: You didn't have any opportunity to observe his relationships then with President Kennedy?

K: Heavens, no!

F: Where were you on that November 22, 1963? Here in Austin?

K: Right here,

F: What happened around here? You had a big event coming up that night, and I'm sure you were going to give full coverage.

K: Yes, our entire personnel was tied up in plans for receiving the President and Vice President and the senior Senator from Texas and a number of other notables. Then we got the CBS news alert, and there was a moment--tension would not be a good word--there was a moment in which the world seemed to stand still.

F: It was a shock, really.

K: And everyone reacted. The news department was finding out what was being done in connection with the scheduled meeting, and then all news was of the incident in Dallas, and programming started working on scheduling, "What are we going to do about the schedule?"

F: Did it put a particular strain on your facilities, because I'm sure there was some interest in Austin reaction in a number of ways, the fact that they weren't coming and the fact that the new President was from here?

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K: Many people at the station worked all of that day, all of that night, and all of the following day without ever going to bed. There was great activity.

F: For more than five years then, Austin was a major international news center. Did this change your way of approaching news problems? Did you have to, in a sense, do much commission work for CBS and, for that matter, for the other networks? Did you make your own local news films available to the several networks or did you principally supply CBS? That's quite an order of questions.

K: In the first place the networks covered the activities of the President. They might utilize some of our facilities. We would do some originations for them, what we call "feeding the network," but the networks provided their own coverage of the presidential party and would utilize some of our facilities. For the most part we would utilize network coverage of the arrival and departure of the President. In the case of a press conference at the Ranch or here in town, our news department would cover for local atmosphere and color, but we depended to a marked degree on network coverage.

F: Did the networks utilize your staff for sort of background material or for a kind of local briefing on who is who, or where do you go for certain things?

K: The press rarely feels in need of any information from any one source.  
(Laughter)

F: They'll make their own way?



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K: That is correct.

F: Okay. You were named to at least two commissions by the President, one on the Council of Economic Opportunity, and one on Basic Adult Education. What were your duties in these instances?

K: To serve in an advisory capacity to the President and through him, to the Congress, on these programs.

F: Did these councils report directly to the President?

K: Yes, sir.

F: Were they term appointments?

K: Yes, sir.

F: Did he hand you questions, or did you originate ideas? How did the councils work?

K: The councils worked as a council and [would] make recommendations to the President.

F: Did he ever meet with you?

K: The first time the council gathered he met with one of the councils. One time.

F: You of course made any number of visits to the White House during that period, and I presume not only ate at state functions but also just ate in the family dining room. I know you have some photographs in here with General Westmoreland. At times like that did the President tend to talk shop, or were they just kind of like family and friends visiting?

K: In the case of General Westmoreland I would say shop. The President will talk shop that is of interest to the guest, for obvious reasons. In the

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first place he wants the reaction of the individual, and in the second place, the President likes information and data. He likes to know what's happening, and contrary to the judgment of some people, President Johnson has great respect for the other man's judgment. Now he'll make his own final judgment, but he wants facts and figures and therefore he will guide the conversation along lines of interest to his guests and along lines and subjects with which the guest is familiar.

F: On an evening like, say, the little dinner at which Westmoreland was present, Westmoreland is obviously a military expert and you obviously are not. But does the President then sort of seek your opinion from the information you two have been fed, because you are a citizen?

K: Mine?

F: Yes.

K: If he did I was not conscious of it. My relationship with President Johnson over a period of the last number of years, during his service as vice president to a marked degree and certainly as president, was that of a person that I think he trusted, and a person who, if you'll pardon a phrase, didn't have a damned thing to ask for. Nothing. I represented no one, no special interest.

F: Just somebody he could relax with.

K: But I think that I was someone in whom he had confidence and that he trusted, and I like to think, because I was usually there by invitation, someone whose company he enjoyed or in whose company he could relax. If I've made a contribution in the life of President Johnson in the last

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six or eight years, it has been in that role.

F: At the White House did you get the feeling that from a social standpoint life was fairly relaxed? What I'm trying to get at, it never struck me that it was quite as formal as it is with some presidents.

K: I wouldn't know because actually I was not in the White House before President Johnson, and up to this point I haven't been since he departed. But I have heard people who are battle-scarred veterans of the Washington scene say that the atmosphere in the White House during the presidency of President Johnson and Mrs. Johnson was--let me grope for a word for you.

F: Sociable.

K: Relaxed is not the word I'm looking for, but the formality was not rigid. There was an atmosphere of formality when it was a formal occasion, but it was not a straight-jacketed, rigid, hard-line formality. There was more of human kindness associated with the required degree of formality. That is what I get from people that had been going in and out of the White House for twenty-five or thirty years.

F: A couple more questions and I'll let you go. You were president of the Board of Regents of the State [Senior] Colleges, which became State Universities, for a period. And of course one of those schools was Mr. Johnson's alma mater, as well as yours. Did he, as far as you know, ever seriously entertain the idea of becoming president there, or did the board ever seriously entertain the idea, or was this just somebody's talk?

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K: Not to my knowledge.

F: You probably would have heard. (Laughter)

K: In that connection I, as an individual and not as a member of the board, have and still do urge him to do some teaching, whether you call it a seminar or whether you call it a lecture. I've let him know that I would be delighted if the first one he did happened to be at San Marcos, Southwest Texas State University; if not the first, then included among those that he does. So there has been that kind of conversation, but there has been that kind of conversation also by some other institutions that I know.

F: As far as you know, was there ever any serious consideration for his library to be put at San Marcos?

K: No, sir.

F: Did he know Dr. [James H.] McCrocklin before he became president of Southwest Texas?

K: No.

F: That's where he first met him, when he went there?

K: Yes.

F: The two men seemed to get on, I judge, quite well.

K: Yes, sir.

F: Did Dr. McCrocklin take a leave from Southwest Texas when he became under secretary or did he cut clean?

K: Leave of absence.

F: So that he expected then to return?

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- K: He was scheduled to return January 1.
- F: Of course we know the unfortunate end of that story. Did the President, as far as you know, feel that this was just a political attack on him, using Dr. McCrocklin as an instrument, or did he, as far as you know, stay completely divorced from the situation?
- K: I can't speak for the President there, but I'll speak for myself.
- F: All right.
- K: And say yes. That's my judgment, I can't speak for the President on it.
- F: Do you think this is part of the same thing that caused them to go after other people within the administration?
- K: Yes, sir. That is my judgment.
- F: How did Dr. McCrocklin react to this attack in your presence? I mean, you can't be totally responsive. Did he have somewhat that same feeling?
- K: If in his innermost mind he ever attached any blame, which is a poor way to put it, to the President, he never indicated it. Again, I had the feeling and I believe Jim McCrocklin had the feeling, that had he not been named under secretary of HEW, that this question would not have been raised at the time it was.
- F: In other words, he just in a sense exposed himself when he moved to Washington.
- K: I think he had that feeling, but I'm not sure on that. And for the tape and on the record, he--Jim McCrocklin--is one of the finest, ablest men that I've been associated with in the field of education.
- F: I thought he was an ideal choice for the position.

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Did you have any intimation that the President wasn't going to run again in 1968?

K: No.

F: Again, you were not his political adviser.

K: That's right.

F: Do you think of anything else that we ought to cover that we haven't?

K: I don't think so. I'll add one footnote, and I think perhaps I might have given this quotation to the gentleman--who was it?

F: Goldman?

K: Goldman, that interviewed me. I was officiating a football game in Corpus Christi, Texas, in the early thirties. I forget the exact year, I'd have to look it up. But it was the evening that the big gas well blew in down at Corpus Christi and caught fire [snaps fingers] and with a great rumble. At the end of the half, a football official with any degree of competence, can ignore the stands if he doesn't hear them, but this noise was pretty hard to ignore at the half. I heard someone calling my name, but you pay no attention to it. I went over and got my jacket. But this was an insistent call and it was this young congressional secretary, Lyndon Johnson, who was there with then-Congressman Kleberg. After I saw who it was, I went over there. The game was a sell-out and they were seated on the special seats along the sideline. He asked me to spend the night with him. I didn't live in Corpus Christi; I was there working this night game.

After the game and I had gone in and showered and changed clothes, I went by and ate a bite and spent the night with Lyndon Johnson. We

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talked, I guess, until three o'clock. Among other things he said, "What do you want to do?" And I told him. He said, "What have you done about it?" I said, "Not anything." He said, "Well, let's get started tomorrow," which we did. And it was a very important evening in my life.

After we had discussed my future, I inquired as to his. He said, "I'm going to stay in public life." I said, "In politics?" "Well," he said, "call it that if you want to." I said, "What is your political philosophy?" He studied a while. "Never pass up an opportunity to do an honorable favor for an honest friend." This was a young man in his early twenties talking.

With that, I'll sign off.

F: All right, thank you.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

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Carolyn Kellam Curtis  
Donor

September 30, 1982  
Date

Robert M. Wane  
Archivist of the United States

October 27, 1982  
Date