

INTERVIEW I

DATE: February 2, 1976

INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH LAITIN

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Mr. Laitin's office, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 2

G: Well, Mr. Laitin, let's start with your background. Do you want to tell me where you're from and how you ended up in Washington?

L: Yes. This is my third tour of duty in Washington. I have now been in government for twelve years. I'm one of these people that came into government for two years, but here I am twelve years later. My other two tours of duty were as a correspondent; I was not in government. One was during World War II when I was head of the United Press staff covering the whole economic phase of the war effort. Then I came back during the Korean War as the chief correspondent for an organization called the Research Institute of America, again, one of these news services for big business executives like the *Kiplinger Washington Letter*. Toward the end of World War II, I went out to the Far East as a war correspondent for Reuters, the British news agency, and I stayed out there for a year. Then I went to Europe for the Nuremberg trials and pretty much traveled around the world quite a bit and finally came back after five years, around 1950, to Washington with this Research Institute job. Then after two years of that I went out to California and was a free-lance writer for the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, various other newspapers, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and so forth. Then I gradually got into electronic journalism and did a lot of radio work.

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Finally I got lonely for Washington and in 1963 came back here to see what was going on and ran into Kermit Gordon, who was then director of the Bureau of the Budget, and Elmer Staats, who was then deputy director. Respectively, Kermit Gordon is now president of Brookings and Elmer Staats is now the U.S. comptroller general. They talked me into coming into government, which I had never thought of doing, and I went to work for the Bureau of the Budget. I was sworn in about two weeks before the assassination of Kennedy, and after a hectic weekend of helping to make the transition at the Bureau of the Budget, I went in to Kermit Gordon and said I was returning to California. He said he had just come from the office of President Johnson, who had asked him to please keep everything stable and had asked Kermit Gordon to remain in his job. Kermit Gordon said to me, "And in turn I would like you to stay in the job, just to give a sense of stability in government." So I agreed to stay.

As you know, a couple of months later Pierre Salinger left suddenly to run for the Senate, and George Reedy, who had been on LBJ's staff for quite a while, was asked to step into that job. After he had been there for a couple of months after the campaign, one day George Reedy [asked me to come on as his deputy]. I knew [George] slightly when we both worked for the United Press during World War II, although he left shortly after I got there. He was a captain in the air force, I think, and I knew him slightly when he came back. I recall, when he came back, I was having a drink with him, and he said he was leaving United Press to join the staff of Senator Johnson. I said, "Why would you give up a good job with the United Press to take a job with a Texas senator?" He said to me, "It's because he's going to be president of the United States someday." I said to him, "You're out of your mind."

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A lot of people thought I was asked over to the White House because he and I were old buddies from the United Press, but as a matter of fact we traveled around in totally different social circles. We just barely knew each other. But we had a little business together after he became press secretary, and one day toward the end of 1964 or the very first part of 1965 he asked me to come over to the White House as his deputy. I dragged my feet on that. I said I thought I could be of more help to him where I was. We discussed that in a couple of meetings. Then one day LBJ called me and asked me to come over there to see him. I came over and I told him about myself and he said, "All right, now get that on one piece of paper for me in the morning." I was rather disconcerted because at the time, while we were discussing this, there was a little bathroom off the side of the Oval Room and he was relieving himself in there while discussing my future. It was not so much the act of this but having the President of the United States conducting his business with me, I found a little disconcerting. At any rate, he said, "George wants you over here. How long will it take you to clear off your desk?"

When the President approaches you that way, you sort of stand up and salute. The only thing I remember is that the next morning when I asked my secretary to please [type my biography], I wrote out my life history in one page, which is of course a very difficult thing when you realize you can reduce your life story to one page. The secretary had been with government for ninety-nine years. I told her I wanted it done right away because LBJ asked me to have it over to his office by eight-thirty or nine o'clock, I forget when. And she didn't have it done. She hadn't even begun it. I asked her, "Do you realize this is for the President?" She said, "Oh, he can wait," which is a reflection of old-time secretaries in government that I find appalling. But you do find the kind of

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people in government who have seen presidents come and presidents go. The fact is I had to call over there and say I would be a half-hour late. The fact is the world didn't stop turning around, but I got it there.

Then shortly after that I moved over there. The first briefing that Mr. Reedy held announcing I was coming over there--I remember reading the transcript of it before I went over there, and oh, I was so mad that I almost called up and said I wanted to stay where I was. Because first of all, he was announcing my coming over there in such a diffused way. He said, "By the way, Joe Laitin over at the Budget Bureau will be coming over here for a little while to help us out. The work load is too heavy." They tried to pin him down. "Well, what will he be?" He kept fuzzing it up. I had a clear understanding with him that this would have the blessing of the President, that I would not be left on the payroll of the Budget Bureau, I would be moved over to White House payroll and that I would be his number-two man as deputy press secretary.

G: That was an understanding you had with the President or with George Reedy?

L: With George Reedy, who led me to believe that he had discussed it with the President and it had the President's blessing. It was implied in what he told me. Then when I read this transcript, which was really my first introduction to LBJ's way of doing things, and finally when the press, as they always do at the White House, said, "If you can't give us a clear definition of what he will be doing here, what will we call him?" Reedy said, "You can call him anything you want." During my period in the White House they pretty much followed that suggestion, too.

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G: Let me go back. You've brought us up to date on I guess your primary activity during the Johnson years, or certainly one of them. Let's go back now. Do you recall the first time that you met Lyndon Johnson?

L: The first time I met Lyndon Johnson was the time I told you when he called me over there and was asking me questions about my life while he was urinating.

G: Had you seen him before, while he was in the Senate?

L: No. If I had seen him I did not recall him. The first time I ever heard of him was when George Reedy, at the Press Club Bar, told me he was resigning from the United Press to take a job with this senator. That was the first time I had ever heard of him. After that, when I was in California he was there and I heard a lot about him. I don't recall seeing him, but several newspapermen told me how impressed they were when he was trying to get the Democratic presidential nomination in 1960. He was there. I was covering the convention in 1960. I had seen him make his acceptance, you see, as the vice president. I was covering it for CBS radio, one of the people covering it. So yes, I had seen him, but I had not talked to him.

G: I take it you had, while you were with Budget, worked closely with Reedy in some capacity or had some contact with him in order to be selected as his assistant.

L: Yes, I did. It was not based on our association with the United Press, which was almost nonexistent. It was on the basis of our working together when I was in the Budget Bureau. Also there I had had some not-direct contact with the President, but you know how close the budget director usually is to the president. I had done a number of things which came to the attention of the President. At the time I assumed that he would never identify me with this project, but with what I knew about him later when I actually

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worked in the West Wing, I realized that he probably knew my name and knew my wife's name and how many children we had.

There was one thing--for instance, I called in a reporter to give him some color on how the budget was put together, and I'd pulled together a lot of different facts. I called in a couple of reporters to give them the background for the column. There was one fellow that was late and so I gave him a special briefing on it. Anyway, there was a story that appeared in the [*Washington*] *Star* the next day. This [briefing] was a very difficult thing to get people to come to because color, putting together the budget, you know, [may seem like] columns of figures. But I sold a couple of people on it; I knew a lot of people in town. The *Star* had a four-column headline on page one. The President called the Budget Director and said, "Who gave out that story? That was a great story." The Budget Director said, "That's my new man, Joe Laitin." "Well, you tell him to do more of that. That's great."

Now about a day later, another one of the people who was there, who had come in late, had a story and the President raised holy hell. He called the Director and said, "You tell that guy Laitin to stop giving out stuff like that." I couldn't figure it out because in my mind I'd given the same briefing to this small group, eight, ten people. Then I remembered this guy had come in late. I'd sort of done it especially for him. So I compared the stories; what was there in that second story that bothered him? I suddenly remembered that I had said that the President at his cabinet meeting had forcefully told them to make a certain point. And there was the AP man, Sterling Green, who said, "Now what do you mean, forcefully? How?" Well, I wasn't there. So I said, "You

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know, banged on the table." That was the only thing he had in his story that the others didn't, and that was the thing obviously that had riled him.

Now looking back, or at that time looking back, I can understand this, because LBJ doesn't bang the table; he doesn't need to. And he resented that in the story, that he would have to rap on the table to get their attention. His manner and his voice would be enough to do it. Also at that time he was being very restrained, in the early days of his presidency. But it was enough to make him pick up the phone and tell the Budget Director, "You tell him to cut that out," without specifying what in the story he wanted cut out.

G: Did you settle in right away to your task as Reedy's assistant and were these tasks clearly defined?

L: No. There was a situation there when I moved over. I technically was replacing a man named Dave Waters, who was a foreign service officer, a very competent man. He was the only man that helped me out. He gave me a two-hour briefing that was absolutely brilliant and that only a foreign service officer could give you.

There was another man there named Mac Kilduff who, as you know, was the only press officer from the White House at Dallas at the time of the assassination, and who flew back on the plane. He gained a lot of visibility as a result of this and has become a minor footnote in history, as a result of it. He also was sort of either a foreign service officer--he came from the State Department. I had heard that the Kennedy people wanted to get rid of him, were planning to fire him when they came back from Dallas. He went to Dallas only because Pierre Salinger was on his way to Tokyo with Dean Rusk as a

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junket, and Andy Hatcher, who was the number-two man, was black and they didn't think it would be very politic to have him go down to Texas. So here was Mac Kilduff.

Mac Kilduff was quite a character. He was great at organizing motorcades and things like that, but he was terribly indiscreet and he was drinking very heavily at the time. Also he was bad-mouthing LBJ and this was getting back to him. I suddenly realized what LBJ's attitude toward him was when I shared an office with Kilduff. One day LBJ stood leaning--you looked up and there he was leaning up against the doorjamb. All he said to Kilduff [was], "Kilduff, I hope your mind isn't as cluttered as the top of your desk," and he walked away. Gee, Kilduff cleaned off the top of his desk and for about a week there wasn't a speck of paper on it. One day later in the week LBJ was there again leaning against the doorway and there was Kilduff's desk spick-and-span. He said, "Kilduff, I hope your head isn't as empty as the top of that desk of yours." Kilduff was kept on mostly because Reedy was trying to protect him and he didn't have another job to go to. He finally left.

But when I came aboard within, as I recall it, a week or ten days, LBJ found out that Kilduff was going up to New York for the weekend, I think it was. This is typical LBJ. He told Reedy he wanted him to take the weekend off, he was tired and needed a rest. He knew that that was going to be a big news day. So there I was, a brand-new man. That was the day that Mac Bundy was supposed to have talked to the [teach-in]--remember that big teach-in--and he was on a secret mission down at the Dominican Republic and didn't show up there. Everybody wanted to know where Mac Bundy was, and all of a sudden this fell into my lap. I think that was the day. At any rate, the

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President had arranged it so that I was the briefer that day and I had never done it before.

That morning--I'm trying to think of this--you probably know her name better than I do.

G: Juanita Roberts?

L: Juanita Roberts called me and said, "Are you briefing this morning?" I said, "I guess I'll have to." She said, "The President would sure appreciate it if you called him before you had the briefing." I remember how amazed I was at her tipping me off that the President would appreciate me calling him. I wasn't used to calling the President of the United States. So I called him. He was very receptive to the call, warm, and he said, "Here are a couple of things you might volunteer. I'm spending 75 per cent of my time on foreign affairs," and gave me a lot of stuff. I parroted this at the briefing. I remember John Chancellor, who covered the White House, the man from NBC, was there. They asked me a few questions and I sort of was able to get through it. I think it was a couple of weeks later Chancellor said to me, "I was awfully tempted to cross-examine you on some of that material you gave us the first day of your briefing, but I guess I'm a kind soul. I knew you couldn't back it up. You were just saying what LBJ wanted you to say." I always appreciated that, because actually he sort of was taking advantage of me in just giving me what he wanted them to think--at that time that he was spending a lot of time on foreign affairs. Maybe he was. If he said he was I guess that was enough.

But he called me later that afternoon and told me I'd done a great job; he was very flattering. He said he was delighted to have me aboard. I said, "I hope I'll live up to your expectations." He said, "There's no question about it. I'll never ask you to lie for me. I want you to tell the truth." Well, if I can be just flip I can say he lived up to his promise. He never did ask me to lie for him. He just told me to on a couple of occasions.

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G: Was there anything regarding that McGeorge Bundy appearance on that first press briefing, the fact that Bundy did not appear? How was that handled?

L: The only reason I sort of backed away from that, I'm not sure whether that was the first briefing or whether it happened about three weeks later. But it's no matter. The circumstances were the same for the second time, when Kilduff was out of town. Because LBJ wanted me to become more visible, not because he had any feeling for me, but George Reedy just aroused all the sadism in him. It was a way of kind of undermining Reedy.

Now at the time of this Mac Bundy business, before the briefing Horace Busby came in and said, "Look, the President wants me to handle the briefing." I was shocked, because first of all he was not in the press office. It was a reflection on me, but even more so, it was an undermining of George Reedy. Now I couldn't challenge him. I just assumed that Horace Busby was an honorable man and that he would never have done something like that unless he had actually been told. But I knew that the fact that he did the briefing was going to lead to additional speculative stories about how Reedy was on the way out. This just simply encouraged the speculation which had already begun. I felt that my loyalty belonged to Reedy, and yet what could I do?

I tried at first to talk him out of it, and he said, "No, the President just wants me to handle this." So I said, "Well, all right now, the Mac Bundy thing, now how are you going to handle it when they ask you why he didn't show up at the teach-in?" He said, "Well, I think we ought to handle it this way." And I said, "No, I don't think so. I think it ought to be handled this other way." Then I did something which--this is where experience comes in I suppose, where you learn how to shoot from the hip. Without even

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thinking I punched that red button which is marked POTUS on the thing. It was months and months before I--nobody knew what POTUS meant except that it was the red button, you know. It turned out it was the telephone man who had put that on there and it stood for president of the United States. But everybody used to refer to it as POTUS and when somebody wanted to talk about the President, if they wanted to say LBJ or the President they would say, "What's POTUS doing?"

So anyway, without even thinking I pressed that and Juanita Roberts answered the phone. I said, "Can Mr. Busby and I come in to see the President?" There was a pause. She said, "Come right in." Busby was all startled by this. We both walked in. I said, "Mr. President, there is a little problem here on how to handle Mac Bundy, his failure to show up at the teach-in. There are two ways of handling it, you know."

G: What was your preference?

L: Well, I can't think right now what the options were. He said, "Well, which way would you handle it?" And I told him. He said, "Why?" And I told him why. He looked at me and he said, "Well, then why don't you handle it that way, Joe?" I said, "Fine." And we walked out. Poor Horace Busby just sort of trotted out and I held the briefing. Now I have a feeling, in retrospect, that LBJ knew exactly what was taking place. There was no question in my mind that he told Horace Busby to do the briefing that morning. There was no question in my mind that it was not because of any distrust in me, but by God, he was going to start introducing another face as a briefer.

This was the beginning of what turned out to be the end. But that's the way he was doing it. When I had the brass to call the President and go in there and I was challenging Busby, he loved that. When I stood up to the situation and stood up to his

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questioning, he kind of admired that and what he did was throw the briefing right back to me as a reward.

G: George Reedy was on the way out at this time, is that right? Did you get the feeling that he was losing some of his status with the President?

L: Let me answer your question this way. I think George Reedy, as far as being press secretary, was on the way out from the day he came in. I don't think George Reedy was a very good press secretary. George may well have been the most important intellectual that ever had an office in the West Wing since Woodrow Wilson, but as LBJ said to me once, "This George, he knows more about more things that I could care less about than anybody I've ever known." That was his attitude toward George. There are very few things you can bring up with George Reedy that he wouldn't have some real profound observations to make or some real contributions on the subject. To me he was a real intellectual, and has a vast store of knowledge and a great power of recall, but he's not LBJ's kind of a guy. Even a man who probably was George Reedy's mortal enemy on the staff once said to me in an unguarded moment, "As much as I dislike Reedy, I'll say one thing. If he hadn't been with LBJ all these years to guide him and keep him from doing certain things, LBJ would never have gotten to that spot which brought him into the White House." That man was Bill Moyers who said that, and there was no love lost between those two men.

When you say was he on the way out, the relationship there is very difficult for me to understand even in retrospect, but I'll say this. From my observation, LBJ over the years ground George Reedy down to a fine powder.

G: I've never heard it put that way before.

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L: With the cooperation and consent of George Reedy, and much to his wife's chagrin. I think that Lillian Reedy hated LBJ, partly I think because of what he did to her husband, although she had enormous respect for him as a man and as a president, but on a personal basis. I remember how shocked I was once down in the Driskill Hotel in the press secretary's suite, and [with] just George Reedy and Lillian Reedy. I don't know whether George was there; I know she was there. We were discussing I think it was the Warren Commission report, we were talking about assassination and also LBJ's preoccupation with getting shot. This conversation went on ten or fifteen minutes and suddenly Lillian Reedy said, "Well, I wish somebody would take a pot shot at him and get it over with." I was just shocked, to talk about the President of the United States this way. But after I had been there for awhile and after you'd been around the White House as long as I've been around, I can understand this. It was a completely impersonal remark, and it was a reflection of her hostility. But she didn't mean it to be taken literally.

I know that at first when I would go out with them I used to worry about assassination too, and what if some guy was a good marksman and all that. Then there came a point, interestingly enough, when I began to worry about a possible assassin who wasn't such a good marksman, who would miss him and hit me! Your perspective changes; I wasn't thinking of the President of the United States any more, I was thinking of this brutal guy that I worked for.

G: You indicated that Reedy, in your opinion, was not a good press secretary. What qualities should a press secretary have that he did not have?

L: All right. It was not so much the qualities and all. George Reedy, that was his man he had gotten into the White House; he loved the guy; he was dedicated to the guy. There

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must have been a great sense of gratification, having helped him get into the White House. He had an enormous regard and esteem for that man, which was not reciprocated. George Reedy wasn't glib enough to be a good press secretary. Furthermore, let me just interject this: a man who would be a perfect press secretary for one president would be a lousy press secretary for another. This is little understood. Jim Hagerty was the perfect press secretary for Ike Eisenhower. He wouldn't have lasted two days with LBJ.

I would say that the perfect press secretary for LBJ was George Christian. Now, why? First of all, George was a professional press secretary. He had had all these years down in Texas with the Governor [Price Daniel and John Connally]. He came from the Hill Country. They both came from the same soil, the same background. George Christian, also, his father was a big politico down there when LBJ was nothing, and his father had been good to LBJ, from what I hear. So he had that going for him. He also had sort of an external, unflappable approach to the press and he was a real pro at it. He also, through certain circumstances, was able to be around the White House for a considerable length of time absorbing the atmosphere and all. He had an opportunity to ease into it. You remember--I'm sure you've run into this--[when] he came in, he was going to be the assistant to [Walt] Rostow or something, he was down in the basement. He was going to take that and he was going to take care of only the Texas press.

I was sort of his liaison at the time; I would go down there and tell him what was going on. I remember how amazed he was when I told him that we took the daily briefings, and we used to edit them before we sent them in to LBJ. Because sometimes the questions and answers weren't what LBJ would [want]. They would send him into a fury. So we would just take it and edit it and send it in to him. He used to read them all

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the time. We would have a girl taking notes as to who was asking the questions. We would change the questions, change the answers. It was just outrageous, you know. But they weren't misleading. What I did object to was when he used to edit his press conferences to a point where there was one press conference he had where he practically rewrote all the Qs and As.

G: Do you remember which one that was?

L: I don't remember which one that was. I've often wished that I'd kept the edited version, which was actually the handwriting on it was not so much his but Jack Valenti. I went to Bill Moyers and I said, "We can't put this out! This is outrageous! We'll get hung by our thumbs!" Moyers said, "Put it in the desk in your drawer. Don't put it out." And I never did know what happened to it. But you see, there was a little historical operation going on there. I mean, these things were being tape-recorded, so that you would never know which one it was because when it shows up now it's all going to be transcribed by the Archives from the tapes. There was one time when he delivered a magnificent extemporaneous address and I tried to urge him to let me put it out and he wouldn't let me put it out. But all the networks had tape-recorded it, and he still wouldn't let me put it out. I don't understand this, but that was. . . .

G: Do you think Reedy may have been too patronizing towards the press?

L: No. No, as a matter of fact, Reedy understood the press far better than Salinger or Christian or Tom Johnson, all of them. But you see, the President used to humiliate him in front of the press. Now toward the end of my period there he began to humiliate me and I made up my mind that this would not go on. What his need is to humiliate people who work for him, I don't know. But there was one time I remember. I think this is even

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before I went over there, but I was at one of these informal press conferences in his office, when he suddenly called the press in, just summoned them in. He said to the press, "Oh, I'm going to such-and-such a place next Tuesday." And they said, "But George Reedy told us you weren't going." "Oh," he said, "I forgot to tell George that I changed my mind about that," and there's George standing right there. So the press began to get the idea that that was not a very good conduit to the Oval Room, and the fact that LBJ was going out of his way to humiliate him, to treat him like a poor stepchild, you can't survive as press secretary that way. But I'll say one thing for Reedy, in that he would always step between the arrows and LBJ; he'd throw his body in between.

G: Can you give me an example here?

L: Offhand I can't, but if I thought about it long enough I probably could come up with an example with it. Now this is in contrast to his successor, Moyers, who is a very successful press secretary according to the press reports, but he wouldn't step between the arrows and the President.

G: Do you think that George Reedy gave too much information, more information to the press than the President wanted given out?

L: No.

G: Was that a problem?

L: No. The only way I can see this is that when you've had a whipping boy around for fifteen years, you don't change your relationship just because you move into the White House. You know, it reminds me of what Khrushchev said in Paris about the U-2 business. He said, "You know, when somebody turns his back and lets down his pants and bends over, you got to kick him in the ass." I think that George has tended to do that.

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In other words, George had a masochistic streak to match LBJ's sadistic streak. That might have been one of the things that kept them together so long, I don't know.

But I'll say one thing for George Reedy when he left that place a couple of years later, after he left the second time. Everybody was being helped by the internal establishment. They were all getting each other jobs. McGeorge Bundy was giving Moyers grants and Califano traveling grants. Nobody did anything to help Reedy. There was only one project he got involved in and he got a financial screwing on that one. Whatever he is today, and I think he's really pulled himself together, he did by himself. I told you before he had been ground to a fine powder. He has reconstituted himself and he is a man today. And he did it all by himself.

G: Can you give an example of the President abusing Reedy?

L: Well, I gave you one example about that in front of the press. I heard he would tell correspondents about Reedy, talk about "*poor* George." He once called several of us in on something and lined us up, about five of us, and there was George, and he made some unflattering remarks about George. He would bark at him. I don't know.

There was one time when Martin Luther King had been in to see him, and King went outside, and the reporters gathered around him outside the West Wing entrance. I followed out to see that everything was still in front of the White House, but there was such a big crowd around him I could only catch little snatches of what he said. But I didn't want to be too intrusive. Anyway, finally when it was over I went back in and just then the President called Reedy and he said, "No, I wasn't there, Joe Laitin was." Reedy said, "Pick up the phone, tell the President what King said." Well, I really didn't know what he had said. I said to Reedy, "I only caught snatches." Reedy said, "Tell him

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anything." So I picked up the phone and I kind of fuzzed up a couple of things. Then he began asking me direct questions and I wasn't about to make up the answers to the President. Finally he said, "Oh, Jesus," and he slammed the phone. Reedy said, "Look, I told you to tell him anything. It doesn't make any difference what happened out there." I said, "I can't tell the President of the United States information that isn't accurate." He went up, you know. When I look back now I realize he's right because LBJ just wanted to hear what he wanted to hear. The trouble is at that time I didn't know what he wanted to hear either. But see, Reedy had been trained in this school; he knew what the problem was. He didn't want information.

G: This I think dovetails into the Reedy thesis of the president isolated by his advisers and depending on or expecting the advisers to tell him what he wants to hear.

L: He never leveled with me. As a matter of fact, over this weekend you know the way things [are], suddenly the light comes on, the bulb suddenly goes on, something triggers it. I was reading a story by Walter Pincus in the *Washington Post* about the CIA and its use of journalists. Pincus deep down in the story suddenly came to a line about how he had once been approached, when he worked for three Carolina newspapers, by the CIA to take a job with them, still with his representation, and go to Europe and he turned them down. "However," he said, "later on I did go to Europe to attend two international youth conferences and my attendance there was arranged and paid for by the CIA." Suddenly I remembered LBJ reading this story by Pincus, who at that time I think was editor of the *Potomac* magazine on the *Post*. He made some very unpleasant, unflattering comments about Walter Pincus and his ancestors. He said, "That hypocritical son of a bitch!" and he went on this way. I couldn't understand how he would know the editor of the

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Potomac magazine, which is a local publication, and suddenly I realized that when I looked at this confession, which it really was, by Pincus, I suddenly realized he was writing a very moralistic story about the LBJ Administration, and LBJ obviously knew about the fact that he had accepted money to attend these international youth conferences. That was what was in back of those vehement remarks he was making. But he never would tell me about that because obviously he was briefed on it by the CIA. Here ten years later I suddenly realized why he was damning this guy. He knew all about him.

G: How would you describe LBJ's attitude toward the press?

L: I don't recall his ever referring to the fellows in there by the term the press, or whatever. He would always refer to those shitfaces. That I think pretty well summed up his attitude. Now you've talked to George Reedy. George obviously had a much different view of it as an intellectual. I've always bought his theory. I mean, George intellectualized a lot about it, and from what I noticed of LBJ, George's analysis was quite right. He never thought of the newspaper business as a business where they had to meet payrolls, where they had union problems, and they had to buy big presses, machinery. He tended to individualize. The *Washington Post* was Carroll Kilpatrick and Walter Pincus and one or two of the columnists he knew by name. Actually it's rather nice, the way he individualized these people. But then on the columnists he would always say, "Get this guy to write a good column about me." You'd say, "Well now, what information can I give him?" "Don't give him any information!" He never knew much about the processes.

Now there was one incident there. This was during Moyers' period. Moyers said, "Geez, the President would like to get some information out but he would like to make it

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look spontaneous." I said, "Well, you know, I think I can plant one or two questions." Moyers, who really didn't know much about the newspaper business, said, "How does that work?" I said, "Well, it's got to be done very delicately, but very often you will find a cooperative newspaperman and he'll ask the question so that when you've got an answer it doesn't make it look as though you volunteered it. It has more credibility because you're responsive rather than volunteering. When you volunteer something everybody immediately is on guard: 'What's he trying to sell?'" So Moyers said, "Let me ask the President about this," and he asked the President. He said, "Will you go ahead and give them the question?" Well, I had a couple of days and I got hold of a couple of guys. I said, "If somebody would only ask the President this, you'd get a very interesting answer." Sure enough, that's what happened. It helps set the tone for the conference.

LBJ, after this is over, was so pleased that he said, "Gee, that's great! The next press conference, let's plant all the questions." I thought he was kidding, but came the next press conference and about fifteen minutes before the time of the press conference Moyers comes out to me with something like ten questions. [He] said, "Here, the President wants you to plant these questions." Well, to do it in fifteen [minutes]! They were gathering in the lobby already! In a panic I said, "Bill, this isn't the way it's done." He said, "Do it!" So in desperation I went out to look for a friendly face. I couldn't find any, but there was one man there, John Pomfret of the *New York Times*, and I had developed kind of a very warm relationship with him. I had known him a little bit before, but down in Texas he played chess and I played chess, and I used to spend a lot of time down there after the gall bladder operation. I had an arrangement with him where he could come up to the press secretary's suite, we'd play chess, and if the President called

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me he had cotton in his ear, he did not hear anything; and if there was any story involved, then he would wait until I could call the press up so there would be no disadvantage to anybody, and he always abided by that. We developed a nice warm relationship. It was pleasant. And in those days when we were down at Texas we didn't carry an entourage the way the press office does now, of God knows how many people; it was me and a secretary, and that was it.

So I saw John Pomfret in the hall, and in desperation--he was a very thoughtful, pipe-smoking [type]--I said, "John, would you mind asking the President this question?" You know, there was no time for any amenities. I had to be blunt, because they were waiting--we were now eight minutes away from the call time. He looked at me and said, "How dare you try to plant a question on the *New York Times*? I consider that just-- I'm offended by this and it's highly unethical." And in just fury--of course, my fury was not really against him, it was against LBJ, but I couldn't very well vent it on LBJ--I snarled at him. I said, "Look, if you don't want to ask the question, don't ask it. But don't give me a lecture on ethics." It rankled, just rankled.

Anyway, as I recall it, Moyers asked me, "What happened?" I said, "Look, I went around to several other guys. I did get one guy to ask one or two of the questions." "What happened to the other questions?" I told Moyers, "You can't do it that way! There's a certain finesse required!" Then to sort of fatten up the story I told him this incident that I just told you about John Pomfret. So he went in and he told the President this.

Once LBJ told me his philosophy of how you handle the recalcitrant press. He said, "Now, look"--and it was in his own colorful language--"when somebody is nipping

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at your ass, you throw him a piece of raw meat." Which incidentally is, with hindsight now, just the opposite of what the Nixon Administration's attitude was. So following his own philosophy, he began calling Pomfret into the Oval Room and giving him exclusive stories for the next week, ten days--front page of the *New York Times* by John Pomfret, exclusive stories.

But this was rankling, the incident with Pomfret was rankling in my mind. So one day he came in. He avoided me; I avoided him. He came into my little cubbyhole of an office and said, "Look, I wonder if you could check some facts for me." I knew that he had gotten another exclusive story that he had to verify, dates or something. So I said, "Sure, I'll have it for you within the hour." He started to walk out. He was courteous, punctilious, but things had really become very cool. As he was going out I couldn't resist, I said, "John, you still feel that same way about planted questions?" He turned around, clenched his pipe in his teeth and said, "I certainly do. I thought I'd let you know quite clearly how I felt about it." I said, "All right, John, just trying to check. By the way, how do you feel about planted answers?" He went out of focus. He stopped. He said, "Joe, it's been bothering the hell out of me." I said, "Well, John, I just thought maybe you owed an explanation to your readers that you were being given these stories by the President of the United States, and they were good stories, but I think your readers probably are entitled to know why you're getting the stories." I was putting the knife in and turning it around, probably unnecessarily. I don't know whether it was cause and effect, but not too long after that he left the news side of the business, went up to New York and became--well, now he's vice president for labor relations. Within a couple of weeks after that he never went back to the news business. I don't know whether there

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was a cause and effect there, but he really was disturbed by that. I just mention that in passing.

Incidentally, as a result of that incident--I was flying in the presidential chopper, coming back from Andrews; it was late, two o'clock in the morning and I was sitting across the aisle from LBJ. I guess it was wintertime. He had his hat and coat on, hat tilted back, late at night--it was after midnight I think. As we were flying from Andrews, about a twelve-minute flight, he was reading that morning's *Washington Post*. He had it turned to the op-ed page and I suddenly realized he was reading the Evans and Novak column. I thought, oh God, I'm going to get it, because that was the column [where] they ripped me apart about the planted questions, how I was going around trying to get everybody to ask the questions, and they mentioned me by name. I thought, oh, he's going to rip into me, having got caught at this. And yet that was the only bit of genuine affection that I think I ever got from LBJ. He finished the column and he folded the paper and he leaned over and half put his arm over, he said, "Joe, don't let those bastards get you down."

G: Do you think pretty much in general he played favorites among the press?

L: No, I wouldn't say played favorites. Just remember that philosophy: when somebody is nipping at your ass, throw them a piece of raw meat. He would go after the hostiles and try to win them over.

I know for instance once he was talking about Peter Lisagor and he said, "What do you think of Peter Lisagor?" I said, "I'd put him--he's a grade-A man." "Ah," he said, "I'd say grade C." I said, "Well, Mr. President, I really feel he's one of the more thoughtful correspondents in this town, he's very fair and so forth." I don't know what

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started this, but all of a sudden he began calling in Lisagor. I remember once Lisagor coming up to the office, and it was about the sixth time in one week he'd been in there. I sort of winked at Pete, I said, "How you doing?" He said, "You know, for the only time in my career I feel that I'm over-sourced." It got to the point where he reluctantly would accept an invitation to go into the Oval Room.

Now this happened with Jim Marlow of the AP, [who] wrote a syndicated column. I was responsible for that, in that one night Marlow called me, about ten o'clock at night; I had just gotten home from the White House. See, LBJ would never let me use the cars and chauffeurs there except under extraordinary circumstances when I could rig it. You can do a lot of things through personal contacts. I was working harder than most people there, but I was not politically privileged. My wife was getting pretty goddamned mad about my coming back on the bus when other people were using the car and chauffeur to go to parties. One time she couldn't resist when the President called me at home. He said, "Where's Joe?" She said, "He's on a Metro bus somewhere between the White House and his home."

Anyway, I got in about ten o'clock and I hadn't had any supper. It was Jim Marlow of the AP. He said, "Listen, I've just been reading that [William] Fulbright attack on LBJ and I think Fulbright is all wet." I don't know whether you remember at the time Fulbright was LBJ's nemesis. He said, "I think LBJ's got a good case, and I am writing this column." He was very widely circulated, two thousand newspapers in the United States alone; he was a very good writer. He said, "I'm stuck here. I just need in the AP to give it some credence. If I could talk to LBJ for just a half a minute, just to say

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I talked to him would give the whole column [credence]. I've got the column almost ready."

So I called Moyers and Moyers said, "By all means, you get hold of the President." I called the President. He was having his massage up in the room. He said, "Phone, no. You bring him up here, Joe." I said, "Fine, I'll be there in half an hour, sir." "No, no," he said, "I mean come right up." I said, "Well, sir, it will take me twenty-five minutes to get into town." He said, "Aren't you in the office now?" Here it is ten-thirty at night. Now, I don't know whether he was needling me or what, but that was his way. There are any number of situations like that, but to this day I couldn't tell you whether he was needling me, whether it was his humor, that was funny, or whether he just assumed he was there, why wasn't I? He was a twenty-four-hour-a-day president.

Anyway, I said, "Sir, I tell you what. I will get him to come down. He can get there in five minutes, but it will take me at least a half-hour." "Yes, you get him up here." So I called him and I said, "The President wants to see you over at the White House." He said, "Oh, great." I said, "Now you go there, report to the southwest gate." I suddenly realized how difficult it was, my getting him in through the Secret Service, being on the phone. In other words, the Secret Service wanted to know--I had to establish my identity. Finally they called me back. I had a direct line in the White House, the hotline off the White House board. Also, could they trust me that the President really did want to see him? It gets all very complicated. Anyway, he went up there and the President spent, I don't know, two hours with him. Then he wrote the column; it was worthwhile. But then the President kept calling him. Finally the guy called me, "Can you get LBJ off my back?" Now, for a syndicated columnist to talk this

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way about the President of the United States just almost has an Alice-in-Wonderlandish quality about it.

G: What about Bill White? Did he see a lot of Bill White in these days?

L: There was a special relationship between Bill White and the President that went way back. They're both from Texas. Bill White had, as nearly as I could tell, a rather proprietary interest in LBJ and admired him greatly. The feeling was mutual. There was a healthy relationship. There might have been the good press secretary for him, if Bill White was able to be a government information agent. See, being a good newspaperman has nothing to do with being a good press secretary. I mean, Ron Ziegler, [who] never worked a day in the newspaper business, was a first-class press secretary, and if it hadn't been for Watergate I think would have been established as such. That's an irrelevant thing, but. . . .

G: What about Jim Deakin of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*?

L: What about him?

G: Well, here was a newspaper that was not pro-administration and most of their stories were stories that the President disagreed with. Did he see Deakin? Did he try to, as you said, throw him some raw meat?

L: He may have tried that, but Deakin was a pretty independent guy and sort of treasured his rebelliousness. If Deakin had been a college student in the sixties he would have been rioting on the campus and all that. He's the son of a physician who rebelled; he didn't want to become a doctor, he wanted to become a journalist. Jim is a highly intelligent man and like a number of other people covering the White House, was indignant at the way things were done, and I suspect has a strong streak of morality in him. But at other

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times I felt he was much more interested in the give-and-take of the press briefing and the satisfaction of baiting the press secretary than getting information. For instance, then he wrote an article in *Esquire* which was rather a cheap shot at the President, I thought, not a very well-balanced story. LBJ didn't have it coming to him.

But then one day Jim Deakin came to me and said he had a problem, that they were celebrating, I don't know, the fiftieth anniversary of that arch they had gotten in St. Louis. They were putting out a special issue and his publisher had said, "We want to get a letter from LBJ to put on the front page." He had asked Moyers and he couldn't get a yes and he couldn't get a no. I asked Moyers about this and Moyers said, "Well, you handle it. I can't seem to get any action out of it." So I went back to Deakin and I said, "Look, you're asking for a special favor now, Jim, yet at briefings you show me no mercy. When I make a mistake you don't let me forget it in front of other people, or when you've got a particularly embarrassing question there are a couple of people here who will ask me the question privately and get a private answer, instead of holding me up to ridicule. But you, you're playing the front-page reporter, the fearless reporter. Now, you've got to produce for your publisher. Obviously the President doesn't want to do it, and you're asking me to cash in a big check for you. I don't owe you anything."

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L: I gave him a little lecture. Then I went to bat and I got that letter from the President for him. But I extracted a price. Now, this had nothing to do with the flow of information out of that place.

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But while we're on Deakin, for instance, Ron Nessen, after he'd been press secretary to President Ford a couple of months, asked me to critique his press briefings. I went to two or three and then afterward I said to him, "Look, one of the problems you're faced with, you let a couple of guys bait you. Don't let them do this. This happens in any administration; this is not peculiar to this administration. It was not peculiar to the Nixon Administration. There are always a certain number of correspondents who are getting their jollies by baiting the press secretary, and they're more interested in that than in getting information!" So he said, "Was it that way in your day when you were here with Reedy and Moyers?" I said, "Sure." He said, "You know, I was covering the White House then. Who were the guys in those days?" I said, "Well, first, Ron, there was you. Then it was Jim Deakin," and so forth.

But Jim Deakin was one of those people. And the pity of it is that I think the White House did it to him. The pity of it is that Jim Deakin is better than that, and he could have made a more important contribution to journalism. Now I don't know what the White House does to people, but I have a feeling that Jim Deakin in a certain way had been corrupted by the White House. I mean corrupted in the sense that I don't think Jim achieved his full potential as a journalist because he was assigned to the White House.

G: Do you think the press felt too much pressure from the White House to write a favorable story and hence rebelled somewhat and wrote [unfavorable ones]?

L: No, you go through any administration, the honeymoon is over and then they start getting antagonistic toward the president, partly because the president starts getting sensitive about criticism. They don't understand him. The Watergate thing was something else. I mean, put that all aside. But even if you recall the Kennedy Administration, Kennedy did

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play favorites. He had his little club; it was this Camelot crap. Bill Lawrence, Bill Kent, Sandy Vanocur, a couple of guys like that, who were [favorites]; they formed a little club. President Kennedy I think really conned them as he did others. Nobody was ever completely left out. But even then I think if you go back--well, politically he was in trouble. That's why he went down to Dallas, if you remember. But if he had stayed there for another two years I think it would have been a gradually deteriorating thing. He cancelled the [*New York Herald Tribune*], didn't he? Now there's a typical example. LBJ would never do anything like that! LBJ would say, "Bring that shitface from the *Herald Tribune* in here," who at that time incidentally was Doug Kiker, who has now become quite a man about town, a celebrity, and a big man in television.

That story I told you about, the chapter in David Wise's book, *The Politics of Lying*--and I will have my secretary send you a copy of it--centered around Kiker. It was always--LBJ just hated him. My theory was that the reason he hated him was they were so much alike. I used to tell people that if LBJ ran for another term that Kiker was going to be the next press secretary. I still think I was right about that. But he hated him so much that this whole chapter was about an incident between me and LBJ in which Kiker played the main role. There's no point going over it.

G: You said that Mr. Wise put it in a different flavor than you would have. Why don't you give it in the way you would do it?

L: Let me just go over it once over lightly. I'll be glad if you want to go into more detail, if you think it requires it after reading that chapter.

When Moyers became press secretary he kept pushing me forward. He wanted me to become the main liaison on the day-to-day operations with LBJ, partly because he

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had his own wood to chop and fish to fry, and if I could take that heat off, because LBJ was very, very demanding. It was a real love-hate, father-son relationship between the two of them but I imagine you're surfeited with stories about that relationship.

G: Anything you have to add we'd be delighted to have.

L: Well, things like when he got into a big fight with LBJ and wouldn't come to the office, he was going to quit. LBJ called me and said, "Where's Moyers?" I said, "He's home." He said, "Will you get him and tell him I want to talk to him?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "When you do that, explain to him what the table of organization in this place is like, will you?" So I called his home and I got his wife on the phone and I said, "Look, the President wants to talk to Bill right away." She waited a minute and she said, "Look, he can't call him now, he's mowing the lawn." Then once when things had gotten so bad, we were leaving some place on *Air Force One*, and as I recall it, LBJ didn't want him and he showed up at the plane, and what was the guard going to do, keep him off the plane? and all that kind of nonsense.

G: What happened in that? Did he end up going on the trip?

L: I think not. I think he was told he was not wanted on there, and Moyers didn't want to create an incident. Once a driver told me the President called him on the phone and the driver said, "Mr. Moyers, the President wants to talk to you." Moyers said, "Tell him I'm too busy."

G: Is that right?

L: The driver who told me this was a sergeant, you know. The sergeant said, "Boy, that was a message I was delighted to deliver." Moyers was a pretty ballsy guy in that respect. But I could go on and on about that relationship and later on we can go into that.

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G: Do you think he was a press secretary for Bill Moyers and not for Lyndon Johnson?

L: Well, you said that, not I. I would put it in other words. I would say when Bill Moyers left the White House that some people there canonized him, people like Scotty Reston and Tom Wicker. If you'll accept those two names I mentioned as among the more perceptive of the Washington correspondents, he pulled the wool right over their eyes. And he did it quite cleverly. The fact is when he left they wrote encomiums. You'd think the whole White House was going to collapse. Now when you get people writing stories like that who suggest--I would put it this way; I would say that the way stories about his departure were handled, it established Moyers as so important in the administration--the only thing I can compare it to now is the attitude that a lot of people have about Kissinger and Ford, that if you pulled Kissinger out there would be nothing left now, especially after the departure of [James] Schlesinger. You would think by reading some of those stories--and I'm depending on my memory then, and there was a lot of emotion involved there--that the feeling was that the keystone in the White House had just been yanked out of there, I should say.

Now for instance, Moyers always wanted me to travel on *Air Force One*. I thought that was most generous of him. In retrospect it wasn't so generous at all. He never really looked at the President as his constituent; he realized that was the source of his power. But if he could make the President happy with me he could devote his time to what he really wanted to devote his time to, and that was courting the press. He would ride on the press plane. But at the time I completely misread the thing. For instance, I would have a suggestion, I'd tell him about it, he'd put it in writing, and I'd write a note to him. He would send my note in to the President with a note saying, "I think Joe's got a

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great idea and we ought to do it." I had never encountered this with a boss, who would give his subordinate total credit with the big boss. You know, if it was a good idea the boss would steal it himself. That's the way the game works. Here was a man who never took credit with the President for anything that I did that was any good. But I didn't understand at the time, the motivation was a little different. I don't want to take everything away from Bill. He had enough brownie points; he didn't need this sort of thing. On top of that he was also trying to cultivate the relationships so that LBJ would leave him alone. This went on for a good part of our association there. He would leave me alone at the Ranch with him. Until finally LBJ began to suspect what was going on.

G: How do you know that he began to suspect? Did the President indicate to you that he felt that Moyers was trying to build his own position?

L: Well, once out at the--you remember that remark I quoted the President as saying, "I wish someone would show him the table of organization here at the White House." In other words, tell him who's president.

G: But you were going to say, once you were out at the Ranch?

L: Once I was out at the Ranch with the press, brought the press out there, and LBJ said, "Where's Moyers?" I said, "He's in Washington." He kind of looked at me quizzically; he obviously didn't know that Moyers had gone back to Washington. He quickly sort of recouped and then started to treat me with a great deal of warmth and respect, only to cover up, I'm convinced, his chagrin at learning that Moyers had just taken a powder. That's pretty subtle, you know, but over the years it sort of crystallized and I'm convinced that my interpretation of this was good.

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Now there were a couple of other things. One of the worst bloopers I ever pulled turned out to be, in retrospect, perhaps one of my most important contributions to the White House. And that was, I was down in Texas during that Christmas period when we stopped bombing North Vietnam. We had briefings twice a day and when they would say, "What's the reason for this bombing pause as a Christmas present to the North Vietnamese?" And I would have to say, "What bombing pause? I assume that probably the weather has something to do with it, I don't know, but I refer all questions to ARVN and Saigon." Every day, twice a day, I would say, "What bombing pause?" I remember calling Mac Bundy and I said, "Mac, I think this is a mistake, handling it this way." In retrospect, incidentally, I'm not too sure it was a mistake, but I was getting awfully tired of being a dummy. Mac Bundy was very uncharitable and he said, "Look, if you don't like being a punching bag, you can always quit. But that's the way it is." Then he quickly said something [like], "Of course, you know I don't mean that. I realize what a tough job it is." You know, he covered up.

Anyway, one night my phone rang about one o'clock in the morning and it was Frank Cormier--that's C-O-R-M-I-E-R, in case you haven't met him--he was the number-one White House correspondent of the AP. He said, "Joe, I'm sitting here writing my overnight story and I'm concentrating. This bombing pause has gotten to be quite a thing." I said, "Frank, what bombing pause?" "Oh, Joe, don't give me that. I'm calling you now just as a friend because I'm sitting here trying"--it was one, one-thirty in the morning--"to figure out an overnight lead. You're the only one I could call at this hour. I just want to talk to somebody to crystallize my thinking. I know you don't know anything." So we talked for a while. He said, "But why doesn't he say anything--LBJ?"

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There's got to be a reason. I can't figure out what the reason for it is." I said, "Frank, did it ever occur to you, when you're not talking you can hear better?" He said, "Gee, you've just made everything fall into place. Why didn't I think of that? Joe, I'm sorry I woke you up." I went to bed.

About six-thirty in the morning my phone rang and it was Al Spivak of the UPI. "Joe, for Christ's sake," he said, "where the hell did the AP get that story?" I said, "What story?" "They're murdering me all over the world. We've never gotten so many rockets." I said, "I don't know what you're talking about." He said, "Let me read to you the lead from the AP story: 'A source in Austin who is in daily communication with the President, [who] was asked today why the President was not discussing the halt in the bombing of North Vietnam, said: "When you're not talking you can hear better",' unquote." I said to Spivak of the UP, "Al, I'm not going to kid you, I said that. He called me at one or two o'clock this morning and said he was just doing his overnight and he wanted to talk to somebody to crystallize his thinking on his overnight story. I told him I didn't know anything about it and during the course of the conversation I did say this, just sort of trying to [understand it] myself, I've been curious why he isn't doing anything about it. I said it and I just assumed I was talking to him, as he put it, as a friend. Identifying me as a source in Austin who is in daily communication with the President, he might as well have used my name. I'm not going to lie to you. There it is. I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm going to do when I hold my briefing today." So he said, "Well, that isn't helping me much, but anyway, I appreciate your candor." I said, "That was not for quotation. I don't know anything. It is not an authorized statement."

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Anyway, I thought, what shall I do? I called Bill Moyers up in Washington, got him out of bed--see, it was an hour later in Washington. I said, "Bill, you better start looking for another deputy press secretary." He said, "What's the matter?" I told him what had happened. He said, "What time is it there?" I said, "Six-thirty." He said, "Look, who's out at the Ranch, which special assistant?" I said, "Jack Valenti." He said, "You're on pretty good terms with Valenti, aren't you?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Look, why don't you call him? About this time Valenti is down getting the AP and UPI wire copy and he's going to bring his breakfast in and so forth. Why don't you call him and ask him to take that AP story out and throw it away?" I said, "Bill, I can't be an instrument in withholding information from the President." Still obviously a boy scout, I still had a streak of the boy scout left in me. Bill said, "It's either that or I've got to find a new deputy, and you're too valuable to me." So I said, "Well, I'll see what I can do." I called Valenti and I said, "Jack, there's a story on the AP wire that would be very upsetting to the President before breakfast. He'll hear about it later. It's AP 6. If you could just throw it away." So Valenti said, "Just a minute, Joe. Yes, here it is. Okay, I've just thrown it out."

So I began to sweat. What do I do for the briefing? Finally the morning briefing, which is nine, ten o'clock in the morning, and I was sweating bullets. I just didn't know what I could say. I was not going to lie. The one thing I hadn't reckoned with was that all the White House press, they go and they're up until three in the morning drinking and they're all on big, fat expense accounts getting golden time. And nobody had read the AP wire. It was there; they had it down. They could look at it, but they weren't interested. I looked at the UPI man, Al Spivak, and I was waiting for him to bring the question up. He

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also apparently sensed that nobody was going to ask me about this and he behaved like a gentleman. He didn't bring it up. It was a rather desultory session, and finally somebody said, "Thank you, Mr. Secretary." Never have I felt so grateful to a guy, and I made it up to him. I gave him a couple of stories subsequently. And as a matter of fact, we're very good friends today.

(Interruption)

--that other story. This is where I learned--the local, the *Austin American* [*Statesman*] had a four-column head on this story. I looked at it and--ten years have gone by and I still wince when I think about it. But it's very interesting. You know, Moyers was right there and I was wrong, in that I'd have been fired if he saw that AP story.

You know, the news follows the sun around the world. The first stories are out of Japan. As the sun keeps moving westward, if you look at the wire copy sometime you can almost see the datelines of the capitals, they're about three hours behind the sun. What happened was, by the time the papers got out to the Ranch there was so much new hell breaking loose in the world that he had his hands full calling Rusk and McNamara and so forth. He just never brought it up. He never did bring it up. It just became unimportant. Yet when I look back on it now, that was a rather sage observation that I had made and actually may have had some influence in some of his thinking, as it turned out. And yet at the time I almost died and probably could have gotten fired for it.

G: Do you think this happened very often, where there was an offending story or an offending AP bulletin that they would cut out so that he wouldn't look at it? Did they generally try to hide things from him that were. . . .

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L: I'm not in a position to tell you that. First of all, it would be very difficult to hide things from him, because he had three television sets in his office that could be operated from his desk simultaneously. He had an AP ticker and a UPI ticker right smack in his office that he was always hovering over. I don't know how he ever got any work done. You see, you couldn't hold back things like that. But for instance, you heard about his night reading folder. Well, they would put together the night reading folder and if there was bad news they would try to enclose some good news to make it a balanced thing. They were giving him a balanced diet. Well, I'm not too sure the world works in terms of a balanced diet.

This was sort of dramatized a little for me by a fellow Paul Glynn, who was the sergeant and sort of the valet. One morning [he] told me that the President would love to have melon balls in the morning. You know, they just scoop out the melon balls. He said, "This morning the melons weren't very good." I said, "Gee, what did he do?" He said, "I have a thing. When the melons aren't very sweet I've got a thing, a hypodermic, and I inject a sweetener in each melon ball." I thought, by God, this is sort of what his professional staff was doing in terms of information, by balancing that night reading, like an editor putting out a balanced newspaper, a little fun, a little sex, a little cooking and all that. But withholding information, he was a very difficult man to withhold information from. That I will say for him.

G: But you've given me two instances where his subordinates tried to sidetrack certain information, keep it from getting to him.

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L: Only to sort of--now, obviously Moyers knew he was going to hear about this later. It wasn't a matter of really withholding information. He knew the wrath that it would arouse at that hour in the morning, that he would overreact to this.

G: Was there a particular time in the day when you generally presented bad news to him, if you could postpone it?

L: I don't know. I'm not in a position to [say].

G: Okay. Now you were going to tell me about the chapter in Wise's book, *The Politics of Lying*.

L: When I would be down in Texas, the one thing you would always hope for down in Texas is that Lady Bird was there. Because if she wasn't there you knew that things were going to be rough. He would always feel sorry for himself if she weren't there, if she wasn't in town. He'd be sitting out there at the Ranch, here's the President of the United States, and he was lonely.

Of course, he loved gossip. He just loved gossip. You know, until a certain hour he'd be making calls, but as the hour gets later even the president of the United States feels inhibited about calling people. Anyway, I always knew about eleven o'clock at night, I'd get a call from him, "What's going on there in Austin?" I began to get the idea of what he wanted. He wanted to find out the gossip among the correspondents; he wanted to know who was sleeping with who. He wouldn't quite come out and say this, but that's what he wanted. So I considered a lot of them my friends, and I don't like to throw people to the wolves and I don't like that kind of cheap gossip. But Doug Kiker, whom he hated, as I told you before, at that time was breaking up with his wife and he was something of a swinger. He was quite a hell-raiser. I fell into the habit without

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really planning it that way. Whenever he would say, "Look, what's going on with the press crew? What did they do tonight?" I began making up stories about Doug Kiker. Sometimes it would be a shred of fact there, but I'd weave it into a story. Sometimes if he really got interested I would add more and more.

There is one conversation where--LBJ had insisted that I put a tape phone recording device in my little office there, which I didn't like, but he did it himself. I remember on this particular evening the conversation was getting so fascinating that for the first time I tried to turn the tape recorder on him. But it was one of these complicated things and I had it hidden under the desk with an oversized wastepaper basket in front of it so that nobody would see it. I never used the goddamned thing. But this time I got the wastepaper basket and when I'm talking to the President, making up this story, I'm trying to kick the thing into action, and I just could not manipulate it with my foot.

But I told him about how Kiker had gone down to one of the cheap bars and had brought about six bar girls back to the Driskill Hotel and it was a disgrace. He loved it. He said, "That guy, that Kiker's no good. I hear that he's doing more whoring around this town." I said, "This was pretty bad, that he brought them back to this respectable hotel," and all that. He said, "This fellow Kiker, I hear that not only that, he's throwing his money around. He single-handed has raised the price of whores from ten to fifteen dollars in this town!" Now I always had the feeling that he knew I was making this stuff up. But on this one particular night I outdid myself with this six bar girls from the chorus line or something, a cheap bar in Austin. I began to wax quite poetic in my description. I even described some of [the] girls to him. I knew that Kiker wouldn't mind and he really was swinging around. At any rate, he loved this particular evening. I mean, he was just

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lapping it up. I'm convinced he knew I was making it up. But what better way to spend a half hour before you go to sleep.

So the next night he called me back. He said, "Listen, I was reading the *Herald Tribune*. The story out of Austin is by a fellow named"--I forget who it was at the moment. I said, "Oh?" He said, "Yes. How come Kiker's name wasn't on it?" Suddenly I went into a panic. I forgot that Kiker didn't make this trip. I said, "Mr. President, his behavior was so bad that word got back there and they sent down another man and pulled him back." So he said, "Well, who's the new man?" I said, "He's a guy who normally covers something or other." "Listen," he said, "why don't we give him a real scoop to show the *Herald Tribune* they don't need Kiker?" I said, "That's a fine idea, Mr. President. What have you got in mind?" He said, "Well, look, I'm going to call the"--oh, what do they call the four economic advisers?

G: Council of Economic Advisers?

L: No, there's a trick name, a code, a trick name for them, it's not the council. It's the budget director, the council, the chairman of the Fed--the quadriad. "I'm going to call the quadriad down at the Ranch for a discussion of the economy." I said, "Fine. I'll take it from there, Mr. President." So the next day he said, "What happened? I don't see the story." Well, what I had done, you see, it was probably a big plus, and that is--there were too many people around LBJ who would take his orders literally, and I didn't. I tried to do what I thought he wanted done for his own best interests. In this case I didn't do anything about it. But he followed up. He said, "I thought I told you to give him this story about the quadriad." Well, I knew this guy. If I said the quadriad was coming down--he wasn't an economics reporter--he would have thought I was out of my

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goddamn mind, or why was I giving it to him. So I had decided to let the whole thing slide and the President would forget about it, but he didn't. When he asked me why I didn't, I said, "Oh, Mr. President, I'm working on that. I've got calls in to the budget director. I've got to flesh this thing out for him. I've got to practically write the story for him. I've got to flesh the whole thing out. We'll make a good story." "Oh good, as long as you're on top of it."

Then I knew I had to do something, and I didn't know what the hell to do. But every once in a while in life you get a break, manna falls from heaven. The guy calls me up, maybe it was about an hour after LBJ. He said, "Listen, I hate to call you at this late hour but my office just called me. The cost of living index has risen X number of points. Do you have any comment?" His office wanted to get a comment. So I said, "Look, don't tell anybody where you got this from, but the President has summoned the quadriad down here for discussion." "Oh, really? When are they coming down?" I said, "Oh, I don't know, but it will be sometime in the next couple of days."

Now, unbeknownst to me--he hung up--he didn't know what the quadriad was. So he went to the guy from the *New York Times*; it was Bob Semple. He said to Semple, "What's the quadriad?" I'm not sure Semple knew either but Semple had been called by Ed [Edwin] Dale, who was the chief economics writer in Washington, and asked if the White House had any comment, and he hadn't gotten around to doing anything about it. So he called Dale up in Washington and said, "Look, I just got a hot tip that the President has summoned the quadriad down here." Dale said, "Are you sure of that information?" He said, "Yes. Is that meaningful?" Dale said, "Yes, this really is one hell of a story." So Semple dutifully went back to the guy from the *Herald Tribune*. He said, "Look, I've

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used it, and here's what the quadriad is," and told him. The next day it was part of the *Herald Tribune*, sort of part of the running story was an insert, but Dale led off with that on page one.

So the President called me and he said, "Who the hell told you to give that story to the *New York Times*?" I said, "I didn't give it to the *New York Times*, I gave it to the *Tribune*! But I discovered the *Tribune* got it and gave it to the *New York Times*. Whoever thought that Gimbel's talks to Macy's!" He said, "Well, goddamn it, you tied this to the cost of living thing. Christ, at your briefing today, you better correct the situation somehow. I don't know what you [should] do, but you better correct it."

So at the briefing I said, "Look, there have been some alarmist stories. This quadriad thing is a routine meeting, because the President is down here. The meeting was coming up about this time. There's nothing extraordinary about it. The President is not unduly concerned about the economy." Well, geez, the next day, front page stories all over: "Quadriad summoned down but the President isn't unduly concerned." Actually the statement that he was not unduly concerned everybody of course read the other way, that obviously he was concerned and that's why he had to say he was not unduly concerned. Well, geez, all over the goddamned . . . the *Wall Street Journal*. The President called me, he said, "For God's sake, what are you [doing]? You're plunging this country into economic chaos!" And it went on this way.

What I'm getting at is that it kind of went on this way for a couple of days and it all started because of Doug Kiker and the dancing girls. Now mind you, the thing really revolves around his personality, but the way Wise handled it, he put it into a more rigid

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structure as though this actually had created a [crisis]. Well, in a way it did I guess, but I don't know whether it wouldn't have happened anyway.

G: I guess the cost of living statistics were the motivation for the press' interest in that.

L: It was a coincidence that these happened to come out, that I had told him about the quadriad and had seized upon that opportunity of his calling me so that I didn't have to call him and sell him on something. Not only that, but here was something that would be a good story tied to the cost of living thing. But I didn't know, you see, that he would tell the *New York Times* and that Ed Dale would blow this up on page one. Because what he did, he was so knowledgeable about this, that for the quadriad to be summoned down to the Ranch showed that the President really was concerned. And actually it was meant to be kind of a routine thing, but how would he know that?

G: Was there another story in the Wise book that he used from you?

L: No, that was the [one].

G: Okay. You mentioned at the outset that the President never asked you to lie, but he told you to on several occasions. Can you recall any in particular?

L: Well, as I said, if you'll pardon me for being flip, I don't know how literal that should be interpreted. For instance, when he said, "Now, you tell them I spend 75 per cent of my time on foreign affairs," I had no reason to believe then and I have no reason to believe since that that was true. So if you want to say he told me to lie, you know, lying is a pretty harsh word. I remember once when I released a medical bulletin on him and I said to Reedy later, "You know, that was a strange [bulletin]." There was something I questioned in there, and I said, "Now why would the doctor say that?" He said, "Oh,

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Christ, the doctor didn't say that, LBJ wrote that." I said, "What do you mean? LBJ wrote his own medical bulletin?" He said, "What do you think?"

When he went to the Bethesda Naval Hospital for the gall bladder operation, after about a week Moyers was on the verge of a nervous breakdown and said, "Look, I'm going away for a week. You take over." At that time the stories were he was still in terrible condition and so forth. I knew he wasn't. I went to the head doctor, Dr. Jim Cain, and I said, "Look, is he really in bad shape?" He said, "No. But you know, I'd like to sort of get him back to the middle of the road." I said, "Will you help me? And I'll help write these things." Anyway, we did and we sort of gradually moved him from the brink of death over to the middle of the road, if you'll forgive my mixed metaphor.

Moyers came back. I had to meet him at five o'clock in the morning. He said, "Joe, I've been listening to your voice on the air in your briefings. You really did what I was not able to do. You've got him back, you neutralized him. LBJ is making a normal recovery and all that, and I want to congratulate you. You've done a terrific job." He looked at his watch and said, "Look, I've got to go upstairs to see the President," and he went up.

He was up there for an hour and he came down looking exhausted. I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "I really had one bloody hour." I said, "What's the problem?" "Joe, you did a lousy job while I was away." I said, "What happened?" He said, "He kept referring to Press Secretary Cain and Dr. Laitin. 'That pair,' he said, 'they're trying to push me out of the hospital.'" He said, "I've got to really do something about this."

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Anyway, while he was up there with the President, I was down with the press, and they said, "Look, we've got to lead off on our early stories. Did he have a good night's rest?" I said, "Yes, he had a pretty good night's rest." So that was big news.

Moyers, when he came down, pulled a couple of things together and then went down for his regular briefing. When he gave his briefing he said, "The President spent a restless night, but he'll probably get a few naps during the day." There was a pause and Merriman Smith of the UPI said, "Mr. Secretary, did you mean to say that he really did have a restless night?" "Yes," he said, "very uneasy, he couldn't sleep a wink." He said, "Well, look, this is very embarrassing. We're all out with bulletins leading our story that he had a very restful night." Moyers said, "I don't know where you got that from. That's not true."

There was a dead silence and finally I got up in front of all these people and I said, "I must have misunderstood the information that I got, because I'll take the responsibility for that. I did tell them it was a restful night." In front of a hundred reporters. The regulars knew what was going on. Nobody made a big deal of it. But Moyers said, "For Christ's sake, what are you doing?" "This is the whole problem," I said, "I talked to the doctors this morning. They said, 'Geez, he had one of the most restful nights he's had since the operation.'" He said, "I know, but you don't tell them that!"

G: Why did he want to stay in the hospital?

L: He wanted the sympathy of the public! I remember one night I brought some correspondent up there [who] wanted to see him, a couple of correspondents. I thought he ought to see them. So I went in there, and there he was for the first time sitting up at a

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table in an adjacent room with his family. He was looking fine and all that. So I asked if I could bring this guy up, and he said, "Sure." So I came back and the room is dark and I thought, "We better go back, the President is sleeping." He said, "Who's there?" in a weak voice. I said, "Joe Laitin." "Joe, how are you? How are you feeling? Are you in good health?" a crack in his voice. I said, "Mr. President. . . ." I had seen him sitting up at the table joking with the family five minutes before.

G: Do you think the press resented the inconveniences that were entailed in their travel? Lack of advance notice and a quick trip to Texas without time to tell their families?

L: Yes, but I hold very little brief with the press about this. They did have that feeling about it. It didn't help the situation any. But either you're covering the White House with the tone and standard set by the President--I mean, that's the way the game is played. You know, LBJ wasn't all that concerned about the creature comforts of the press. Now the Nixon Administration, they were very concerned about the creature comforts of the press, and the press is a sucker for things like that. I don't hold any brief for them on that. But yes, if you want to know if it irritated them and all that, created ill will, yes.

G: Do you think that affected their stories?

L: Whether it affected their stories or not, no, I would doubt it. I have found, if you'll permit me this generalization, that being very nice to guys who are prejudiced against your client doesn't change their stories very much, and being unpleasant to guys that are favorably disposed doesn't change their stories very much. In other words, all this external stuff, this PR business, is in large part kind of a waste of effort, a waste of energy. Basically the press is interested in headlines. I almost said news, but they're not. They're interested in headlines. If you give them the headlines, you're a great guy, and if you don't give

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them the headlines, you're a bum. I've expressed that in rather crude terms, but it sums it up pretty well.

G: Considering that the President in person and in a one-to-one conversation was an awfully persuasive, dynamic man, do you think these private interviews that he gave helped his image with the press?

L: I think now that he is dead it does. I think at the time I really doubt that. The name of the game is headlines. It's money in the bank for the correspondents. I had dinner the other night with the head of the Westinghouse Bureau. They've just expanded it, but he's still head of the bureau. He is so devoted to LBJ. Why? Because once he was broadcasting live from the White House, and after LBJ held a press conference LBJ came up to him and said, "Sid, are you broadcasting live?" And he said, "Yes." He said, "Let me get on there with you, Sid. Sid, I want to tell you, in case your listeners don't know, you're one of the best men covering the White House. Boy, from you they get facts." You know. This guy, to this day, would do anything LBJ asked him. It was a very generous thing for LBJ to do. And you know something, he may very well have done it without any thought of getting something in return. That was one of the nice things about LBJ. The head of the Westinghouse Bureau, who had maybe seven radio stations, could not have made that much difference to the President in terms of exposure. Sid Davis himself was not all that influential a correspondent. All he had was these six outlets. Yet here was the President, who went out of his way to build the guy up.

So when you say, did it help, in the long run I don't think those things really are all that important. You invite a guy and his wife to a dinner, it doesn't hurt. I don't think it really affects the guy's long-range output in terms of news. Sometimes when he's going

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to make a harsh evaluation, he may temper it a little bit, which he should do anyway, I think. He may write one story in return for the favor, you know, a little puff piece. Everybody does that. But that doesn't affect the long-range image. Jim Deakin, after I finally got that letter for him on this arch, the front-page letter which sort of saved his face with the publisher, I don't think it really ever affected any of the stories he wrote. I wouldn't have had any respect for him if it had. As I recall it, he stopped making my life so miserable at the briefings, but it didn't have anything to do with the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch's* reports.

Oh, there are certain people who become lap dogs and you have an arrangement with them. They're the guys you plant all the questions with. I don't mean the random questions, but they become a regular outlet for you. You give them stories when the President particularly wants one story played up. They'll do it for you. In return for that, it's *quid pro quo*, you do things for them. You know, Jack Horner of the *Star* was our mouthpiece. And Jack made it pay off. He made it pay off for the *Star*, I mean.

G: Let me ask you about some other people. How about Sarah McClendon? She must have had an interesting relationship with the President.

L: I don't know too much about it. I'm very fond of Sarah on a personal basis. Here she was--I don't know whether she was a widow or what, but she brought up all her kids being a gadfly around town and a paper, it was the *El Paso Times* or something. She really made a career out of this. She throws her weight around. She's got much more impact than her outlets would suggest, she and that [Otto] Otepka business. But considering that she was one of those outrageous people you find in this town among the

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press corps, I don't know, she rather had a healthy approach to things. She's something kind of special, I don't know.

You know May Craig, she sort of inherited part of the May Craig mantle. Now May Craig, he knocked himself out for May Craig and I once asked him why. I said, "She only has this Maine newspaper and some other newspaper, and I hear she doesn't even write her own copy. She can't write her own name, you know, and yet you give her all this time." He said, "When I was in the hospital with my heart attack, she sent me a little note every day." When she retired he went to all of the farewell parties, or some of the farewell parties for her. And aside from the fact that when she got on television—she even came with that kooky hat and all that--she became kind of a character, which had nothing to do with what she was writing. But he said, "When I was in the hospital she sent me a little note every day."

There was one. I don't know whether this answers one of your questions. He had a rule there that for anything to be carried live on television out of the White House it had to have his personal okay. One day I was faced with a dilemma: one of the rural electrification associations was his pet, I think it was the one down there. He had things like that, it was all emotion with him. I think it was the national REA group. He had them all on the South Lawn; he was going to talk to them at three-thirty in the afternoon. It was an LBJ thing. He was going to get up, no prepared remarks, he was just going to talk. But he loved the REA people dearly.

There's a whole story to that, too, if you went behind his feeling toward the REA. A man like Reedy could probably give you more detail on that. At any rate, I got a call from Len [Leonard] Allen of NBC. He said, "Listen, what's this thing on the South

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Lawn?" I said, "Oh, Len, you wouldn't be interested in it." "No, look," he said, "we have a half hour of network time from three-thirty to four, and suddenly it's a blank. What we were planning for it has cancelled out and we got an SOS from New York, asking do we have anything to offer them for the half hour, and after all, this is the White House. The President is going to be there and it could just fill in that half-hour."

So, mindful of the fact that it was the pet organization of the President and if he had found out I had arbitrarily turned down an opportunity for national network exposure, he'd have my head probably, anyway, I said, "Len, I'll call you back. Give me fifteen minutes, twenty minutes." So I called him in the office. I was already figuring should I take credit that I twisted NBC's arm to try to get his pet project on? You know, you've got to work like that. Or should I tell it like it was?

Anyway, I called Juanita. Juanita said, "Oh, he left a few minutes ago to take his afternoon nap." So I called Sergeant Glynn, who was just outside of the bedroom, and I said, "When the President comes in I'd like to talk to him before he [takes his nap]." "What do you mean before? He's in there and he's just fallen asleep." So I said, "Well, could you wake him up to give him a message?" He said, "Not me!" So I hung up. I thought, gee, what the hell do I do? I could not see myself going into the President's bedroom and waking up the President. It's a rather awesome task. And yet, if I didn't disturb him and let it slide and he woke up from the nap and found out, then it would be too late, you see. If he found out that this had been offered and he wanted it, as I said, he would have had my head.

So what you do in a situation like this? You resort to a little ingenuity. This is one of the reasons Jack Valenti was around that place. He served a very useful purpose

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around there. I called Jack and I said, "Jack, what do you think? NBC wants to carry that REA thing on the South Lawn." He said, "Great. The President will love it." I said, "Well, will you authorize it?" He said, "What do you mean?" "Well, you know the President has to personally okay any live television coverage out of this place." He said, "That's right. Why don't you call the President?" I said, "Jack, he is having his afternoon nap." He said, "Well, I think this is worth waking him up for." I said, "Thanks a lot, Jack. Will you let me know what he says?" He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Jack, I think you ought to go over there." He said, "No. Why don't you do it?" I said, "Jack, the President has a heart condition. Just imagine if I went in there and woke him up and he opens his eyes and he sees a strange face. It's a startling thing when you come out of a deep sleep. You're a member of the family." So Jack said, "I don't know why it is all the tough jobs around here I always seem to inherit." I said, "Jack, that's one of your great values. You're the only man in this place that could do something like that." So he was both flattered and. . . . So he said, "Okay." I hung up and turned my attention; I thought, there's one problem I've solved.

Two minutes later the phone rang, it was Len Allen of NBC. "Hey, Joe," he said, "we got something. Forget the request." Oh, Jesus! So I called the last Secret Service agent at the elevator and I said, "Stop Valenti from going up." He said, "He just went up." Pressed the phone, and, you know, at times like this the dial tone doesn't come on. Anyway, I punched and I got Glynn, and I said, "For God's sakes, stop Valenti from going in." He said, "He's in there. He's just sort of gently touching the President's shoulder. He's being very gentle about it." I said, "Look, take this note down and give it to him right away. NBC has cancelled its request to carry the REA meeting on the South

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Lawn. Give it to Jack right away." So he goes in there and he gives this to Valenti. Valenti is trying to look at it. Just then the President blinks and he said, "What is it, Jack?" He said, "Mr. President, NBC has cancelled its request to carry the REA association meeting on thy South Lawn." He was reading my note, you see. The President said, "Is that what you woke the President of the United States up to tell him?" He said, "What I mean is NBC, Mr. President, wanted to carry that live and they've just cancelled the request." The President said, "For Christ's sake! Even the President can't take an afternoon nap without your waking me up to tell me an idiotic [message]." Anyway, I wasn't there. I got this, obviously, from Valenti and a little bit from Glynn.

He stormed back to my office. If he had a dangerous weapon on him, that little man, four feet, six inches high, would have pounced on me. He would have plunged that dagger into me thirty times. He said, "How many of these things can I stand around here before--?" I said, "Jack, lots of them. You're the only one the President would take this for and I'm very grateful to you. I tried to stop it, but it just didn't work out."

Jack Valenti was a--I haven't read his book, by the way, yet, but I'll never forget when he made that speech. I came in and I heard he'd made that speech up in Boston about how he sleeps a little better every night knowing that the President was in the White House. So I couldn't believe it. I asked somebody if they had a copy of his speech, and I got a copy of it. I looked at it and there it was. I had about twenty-five copies run off on the xerox for my private use and I was giving a couple of correspondents I trusted, I said, "You won't believe this but here's a copy of Valenti's speech." About two hours later the phone rang and it was Valenti. He had a direct line into my office. He said, "Joe, is that true that you had copies of that Boston speech

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reproduced and you're giving them out?" I said, "Yes, Jack." "Gee, Joe, I really want to thank you. Have you got an extra twenty-five copies for me?" (Laughter)

G: That's terrific. Do you want to break here or keep going. We've gone about three hours on tape.

L: Have we really?

G: I've got a lot of topics here but perhaps if we are going to have another session, maybe. . .

L: All right. See, there are lots of odds and ends which sort of come to my mind. I tell them on different occasions. I get prodded into them. Certain things trigger my memory.

Like the time I wanted to [dispel rumors] Somehow I inherited this. Every time there was--what do you call it, down at Cape Canaveral?--a space shot, I would have the photographers and him watch, you know. As a matter of fact, the first color broadcast out of the White House was one of these shots that I arranged, the first time. If you're interested in firsts, which I'm not. But then they pulled a tricky one on me. You had to watch for these things constantly. They didn't mean it that way. They would be broadcasting from Cape Canaveral and then they would say, "And now we'll switch to the White House where the President"--and then when they did they would feed that up to New York and feed it in, you see. Then without telling me, what they did was switch it so that they would take it down to Cape Canaveral, they would put it into the main feed. So I was startled at this time and I acted quickly on it. I cut out the photographers. Because what you suddenly have--I was startled to have--is a picture of LBJ looking at LBJ on television. Here would be the shot that they had just taken and fed down to Canaveral. How did that work? I could figure this out. There's a mathematical reason why, of the three networks, on one of them there would be the picture of him watching

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himself, which was created by this--I could figure it out if I had time, you could do it yourself or the historians can figure out why it was. I knew that in a couple of years this would deteriorate into publishing stills of an egotistical man who was watching himself on television, which was not what he was doing at all. It was a feedback of the picture they were photographing right then and there.

Anyway, to get back to the incident I started to tell you about, I was sidetracking myself. Is there enough tape for me to finish this story?

G: Yes.

L: I was down in Texas and there was another blast-off, and I had already told him that we oughtn't to let the press watch him at space shots any more. It was getting to be too much of a cliché. I said, "Besides that, one of these days there's going to be an accident and there you're going to be identified with watching it and then right then and there whatever you do might be misunderstood. Why don't we just skip it?" But then at this particular time, I don't know whether it was used as a device by the reporters with him or not, but this would come up more than once. Whenever they hadn't seen the President for a long time, or they were trying to needle the press, they would come and say, "Look, we've got a report from one of our clients that the President has got cancer." Well, if you denied he had cancer, right away you're in trouble. In this particular case he hadn't seen the press for a while and this was during the recovery of the gall bladder operation. One of the guys said, "Look, I hate to bring this up, but you know we have had a report that he's not doing very well." So I said, "That's nonsense, but you can't quote me on that."

The next day there was a space shot, so I called the President and I said, "I'd like to bring out a pool of cameramen and newspapermen to watch you looking at the space

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shot." He said, "I thought you told me I shouldn't do this anymore." I said, "Well, you know, there are some stories that your health has deteriorated--rumors--and this would be a great way of showing how robust you are without arranging the meeting for the purpose of showing how robust you are. The pretext is to watch the space shot. In the meantime all the pictures will show what good health you're in." So he said, "All right. The trouble is, when they lift off, I've got to watch the way I look because if I smile then I'm being callous toward here are our brave astronauts about to risk their lives, and if I look grim then I got cancer!" I said, "Yes, I know, sir, but I really think that this would be a good case. You're looking fine, healthsome," you know, I buttered him up. He said, "All right, you bring out a small pool. But don't bring them on the Ranch. Keep them outside until I tell you and then two minutes before the space shot, you bring them in and let's get it over with."

So we went out there. There was some conversation on the phone I hid with the Ranch. We were running a little late. They have to set up the cameras, and it takes time. I didn't know what the set-up looked like in his den at the Ranch. We came to the entrance. The Secret Service agents said, "Well, look. You better go in." I said, "He really didn't want me to go in, but it is running late. Didn't he say anything to you?" and they said, "No." So I said, "Well, hell, let's go in." So we go in.

We approach within a hundred yards of the house and an agent comes down. He said, "The President wants to see you, Mr. Laitin. Leave everybody else stay here." So I went up there. He's in his Ranch suit and he's glaring at me, "I thought I told you not to bring them in, to keep them outside until I told you to [come in]." I said, "I know, sir, but it was getting late and I had to set up." He said, "But I told you not to bring them in and

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you violated my orders! You violated my orders, didn't you?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "And I told you not to bring them up here." I said, "Yes, sir." It went on this way and I kept saying, "Yes, sir." "No, sir." "Yes, sir." "No, sir." Finally he whirled around and he said, "Will you cut out that 'sir' shit?" I said, "Yes, sir." Finally he said, "Okay, bring them in now," and we got the pictures and off we went. But again, when he said, "Cut out this 'sir' shit--maybe he said 'sir' crap," I don't know. Again, I didn't know whether he was needling me. What was he venting? What was he angry about? I don't know. He never brought it up again.

G: How did the filming go?

L: Fine. It served its purpose and there were pictures all over the country, here was the President watching, looking in fine health. So we didn't have to deny that he was ill, had cancer. There was a certain amount of subtlety involved in this. It's a tricky business in the White House denying anything, and the press sometimes is pretty irresponsible about this.

G: I guess they assume if you deny it right away that you have some knowledge of. . . .

L: Sometimes it's that and other times it's a quick headline, it's a cheap shot. Sometimes if it's done a certain way they may figure, "Jesus, he's denying it's this way. There must be something to it." And sometimes there is. But denying the President has got cancer is a pretty tricky business. And I suspect that the press was using this as a device to keep us off balance. As time goes by the more convinced I am of that, because they use every gimmick in the book to keep you off balance when you're in government. It's part of the game.

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Let's face it, it is an adversary relationship, but there's no reason why it can't be a healthy adversary relationship. Too often it deteriorates into an unhealthy adversary relationship. I think that it's gotten much worse since those days and I find it rather alarming. I think the breach between government and the press is widening. I think the pity of it is that in the long run the government is going to win, which makes it even worse.

[End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview I]

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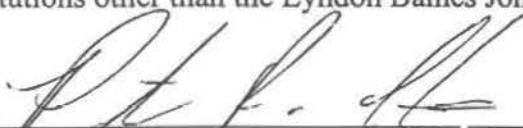
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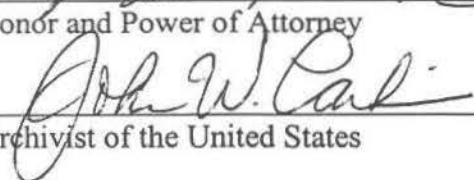
JOSEPH LAITIN

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Peter Laitin, son of Joseph Laitin, do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of the personal interviews conducted with my father, Joseph Laitin, on February 2, 1976; and on February 12 and February 13, 1977, and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

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