

### INTERVIEW III

DATE: FEBRUARY 13, 1977

INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH LAITIN

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Mr. Laitin's residence in Bethesda, Maryland

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L: We never got into the [subject of the] Pope in New York.

G: Okay. Do you want to take that up?

L: Yes, let me pick [it] up now. We finished with the Pope in Rome, and I believe that the meeting of the Pope with President Johnson in New York preceded the meeting in Rome. I am almost certain of it, and I handled both of them. That is why I opened my remarks on the meeting in Rome [by saying] that I was probably the world's leading expert in an area for which there is very little demand, meaning arranging meetings between the President of the United States and the Pope.

The meeting [was held] in New York, for reasons that I don't recall. For protocol reasons the Pope couldn't come to Washington. There were certain delicacies there about the Pope coming to Washington to pay homage to the President. On the other hand, there were certain delicacies about the President going to the Pope. As I recall it, there was a bill that was signed on Bedloe's Island on which the Statue of Liberty is located, and that was the reason that the President, by happy coincidence, was in New York at the same time the Pope arrived in New York. I know these things sound ridiculous but that's the way things are. So inasmuch as the President of the United States was in New York at

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the same time the Pope was in New York, it would seem quite natural that the two ought to get together for a little chat. Inasmuch as the U.S. Government had its UN headquarters in the Waldorf Astoria, and the Pope, I believe, was staying in the Waldorf, it was decided that would be the scene of the meeting.

While everybody in the White House was off at Bedloe's Island, I was up at the Waldorf arranging for the meeting between the President and the Pope. It sort of had to be on neutral territory. Where do they meet? It couldn't be in, as I recall it, the suite set aside for the President. The wallpaper had--I don't know what war it was, but there were battlefield scenes and that didn't seem very appropriate to discuss the possibility of peace in Vietnam. So I went to see various other suites in the Waldorf Tower that might be available. I was amazed at how many luxurious suites there are that are occupied by people only a few days of the year, wealthy people who maintain these places with carpets in which you sink up to your knees. In one place there was a water closet with real gold toilet bowls and things like that. It is irrelevant to the story, though not too irrelevant. There was one Texas oil millionaire that had such an elaborate suite that I thought it would be inappropriate for the President and the Pope to meet in it. What really turned me off was when the representative of this Texas oilman said, "Now, I want to make one thing clear." He said that they couldn't meet there if either the President or the Pope smoked during the meeting there, including the attendant people, because the carpets were made out of God knows what. I couldn't make any promises of that kind, but anyway I thought that was a rather inappropriate place for the two of them to meet. I finally found a suite that I felt met all the minimum requirements, not too ornately decorated and so forth.

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G: Whose suite was it?

L: I don't remember anymore. I don't remember. It might have been an unoccupied suite, it may well have been. Then there were some problems I had and that was I didn't like the picture hanging over the fireplace--decided in front of the fireplace was where they should meet--because it was, again, a war scene. There were more darn war paintings around, I didn't realize it. So fortunately I had run into Dave Waters, who had been the protocol officer in the State Department for years, who was also a very good artist. So I called him and I said, "Could you go to the museums in New York and find an appropriate painting that could be hung over the mantelpiece for the meeting?" He borrowed a painting that cost, I don't know, a hundred thousand dollars, from the Modern Museum, so there was a chore that was out of the way. It was a beautiful [painting], which you can see in the photographs now of that meeting in the background. Then I also asked him to get some candle-pieces to hide some blemishes there in the background, and then we had to get identical chairs.

All of these arrangements were fascinating. I recall in the meantime I was keeping Bill Moyers, who was the press secretary and the man I was working for, posted on what I was doing. I will say one thing about Bill Moyers, when he delegated authority, he delegated authority. The whole thing was in my hands, but I used to apprise him of the progress. At one point I said to him on the phone, "We've got one problem. I've got identical chairs for the two of them"--it had to be done evenhandedly. "One problem," I said. "The Pope, I understand, is going to appear in his white robes with gilt and red trimmings. Bill, how can you compete against that?" And Bill said, "My gosh, maybe we can get LBJ in a cowboy suit. That will take some of the attention away from

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the Pope." (Laughter) But it was a matter of some concern. Those are the things you worry about.

There was one thing that was rather significant there. I was told--and the instructions may have come to me through Moyers--that this meeting was the public meeting, because in an adjacent room I [had] set up, the Pope and the President were going to sit down and talk about substantive matters. Then they would come into this other room for the photographs and also the television, and this was being broadcast live all over the world. I did not attend the private meeting. Bill Moyers did. I understand that the President on a number of occasions tried to bring up the question of Vietnam, and all the Pope would say was, "The bombing must be stopped." You ought to go into this more with Moyers. I think McGeorge Bundy was in there at the meeting, too. So what I am telling you is more hearsay, but it was fresh hearsay at the time.

The one incident I do remember very well because of its amusing aspects, is that the President kept saying to the Pope, "I want you to know that I am planning to send my trusted aide Jack Valenti to Rome as the ambassador." And the Pope said, "Who is Jack Valenti?" (Laughter) He was totally unimpressed by this, and the President was using that always as an ace card. I presume that what he was saying was, "I am sending an Italian, my trusted aide, an Italian," and the Pope was totally unimpressed.

There was one other thing that I recall. The Pope, of course, had this same photographer with him, whose name I don't remember. You ought to get the name of him because he was the Pope's photographer. Remember, back in Rome I told you that they thought he was charging too high prices, monopolizing [photography of the Pope]. In this case, we maneuvered it so that we got [Yoichi] Okamoto into this private meeting,

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and we left him [the Pope's photographer] down in some other room, and he was just fit to be tied, because he was with the other photographers at the public meeting, whereas Okamoto was in the private meeting. It was a little bit of skullduggery on our part.

One other [thing], Moyers came out of this meeting and said to me, "The President does not want any microphones present, [he] doesn't want any sound at this public meeting." It was a picture-taking session, basically is what it was, and I notified the networks that there was to be [no sound].

(Interruption)

He told me that the President under no circumstances wanted any sound. Now the only problem there was with the networks, of course, and there were miles of cable and whatnot. It was on the thirty-fourth floor or something, and they had strung these cables up from the bottom. The networks went to a great deal of expense, and they were broadcasting this live. Now mind you, this was basically a still-photo session, but you couldn't keep the networks out. Now, on the sound, because of the emphasis that Moyers put on it, that the President had personally told him to tell me, "No sound," I rather suspect, if you will forgive me, that the reason for it was that the President didn't want the Pope in effect addressing the American people in his presence, and that was his way of doing it, to make sure there was no sound capability.

So what I did was to notify the networks of this. Then what I did [was] I called the Secret Service. They are experts, and I said, "You check them to make sure there is no sound capability there." Not that I don't trust the networks, but they will cut corners. The producer in charge, as I recall, was a man, slight of build, named Charlie Jones who was with NBC, still is. As a matter of fact I ran into him the other day. He is a very

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difficult man to deal with, a man of considerable talent but terribly, terribly difficult to deal with. Now if he had come to me and said, "Look, why don't we keep this capability there? We promise you it will not be used except at your instruction." If we had that kind of relationship, things would have worked out all right, but as it turned out, I made so certain that there was not that capability that I later regretted doing my job so well. Also it doesn't speak well of the networks. If they were clever enough they would have still kept that capability without letting us know.

At any rate, the Pope and the President came out. The Pope sat on the left, facing the President who sat on the right. The first thing, the Pope turned to the President and said he would like to say a few words. I am standing there, the Pope began talking, and [Paul C.] Marcinkus started interpreting, standing in back of him. There wasn't a tape recorder in the room. There is a picture of me that I still have, humped over, trying to copy down these words that the world was waiting for. Among the pool reporters, about twelve of them, there was the Reuters man. I don't know whether you know this about the British: British newspapermen consider part of their training the ability to take shorthand, not so with the American press. He was the one British correspondent there. He was the only guy there who got the text of the Pope's remarks. Also, there was the embarrassing situation of the whole world watching the Pope talking, with the interpreter translating, and--

G: No sound!

L: No sound! Then, of course, the President felt that inasmuch as the Pope had talked, he was going to have his say. And he did, too, and no sound! (Laughter) To this day, I get red in the face when I think of this, and Charlie Jones still has not forgiven me.

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G: But that's the way LBJ wanted it done.

L: That's the way he wanted it.

G: What was his reaction to the absence of sound? Do you recall?

L: I don't recall whether there was any. It was such a hectic day. But the one thing that saved the day was the fact that Ralph Harris of Reuters took the whole thing down in shorthand and had the text of everybody's remarks. After dictating it directly to London he shared it with everybody else, so the written words of those that were spoken were not lost on the world. But there is no recording of it and I, if you please, am responsible, because the one time when I literally carried out the President's instructions, which I did not always do by the way, it boomeranged on me.

G: WHCA didn't even tape it?

L: Who?

G: WHCA, the White House Communications Agency.

L: For some reason or other, they didn't. I don't recall the circumstances of that, nor do I recall why I didn't have some trusted aide with a secret tape recorder there. But the point is that these instructions were so explicit, that it would be a picture-taking session of X number of minutes and that was it, and directly from the President.

There were a couple of other problems. It was decided that the President could not go to the Pope. The Pope would have to come to the President, because some of the American public might misunderstand if the President knocked at the Pope's door calling on him. At the same time there were other complications. For instance, everything was carefully measured out: how long it would take the elevator carrying the Pope to come up to the, I think it was, the thirty-fourth or thirty-seventh floor, around there; then how

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long it would take him to walk from the elevator to the suite the President was in, everything. The cameras were on the Pope when he got into the hotel, picked up by the cameras in the lobby as he got into the elevator. Obviously, in the elevator, they figured, it was what, fifty seconds to get to the thirty-fourth floor. Then the cameras would pick him up on the thirty-fourth floor, down the hallway, and then of course right into the suite.

[There were] a couple of problems here. It was the beginning of what they used to call the "creepie peepies" on television. Now they've got it so that almost one hand will hold these things, but in those days that was quite an innovation, [a photographer with a camera] over the shoulder with a guy guiding him walking backwards. So the idea was that the television people got him into the elevator and then seconds later would catch him as he emerged from the elevator, walking down the hallway, as he went into the [suite]. I, on my own, arbitrarily ruled that we would not permit the "creepie peepies" to pick him up as he got out of the elevator and go all the way to the President's suite, for two reasons, and I had gotten some guidance elsewhere. For one thing, here is an old man of seventy, and it took, I forget what it was, two and a half minutes to go from the elevator at his pace, we figured. Tens of millions of people all over the world watching this would say, "The least the President could have done was to have gone to the elevator to meet him," or, "Making that poor old man go all that distance!" And it would be dramatized.

Then there was one other little aspect. Here, for two and a half minutes, would be the Pope having all of American television and world television all to himself. It seems rather crude, doesn't it, but yet these are considerations. So I ruled that for other technical



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reasons [they could not film the Pope]. You concoct an excuse, very often aided and abetted by the Secret Service, who are always willing to say there are security reasons for it. It's shoddy but very useful. [So I ruled] that there could be no "creepie peepie" to follow the Pope's progress.

When this decision reached the people involved, I got a really nasty phone call from Lloyd Hand, who was then the chief protocol officer, and he was outraged at this. I explained to him what my reasons were, the fact that here was this old man, that people might feel it was disrespectful to have him walk all that [way]. He said, "But here's my one chance to be on television for two and a half minutes alone and you're robbing me of it." He wasn't thinking of the Pope, he was thinking of himself. He said, "I'm running for lieutenant governor of California next year. (Laughter)

I at the time didn't see the humor of the situation and, mind you, this was all done with no sleep for twenty-four hours, and my decision held up. To this day I don't think Lloyd Hand has quite forgiven me for this, and may have very well blamed his defeat in the election on this. As a matter of fact, he did comment on it to me when I ran into him later, and I don't know whether he was serious or saw the humor in it later.

One other thing I would like to mention: After the remarks of the Pope and the President or maybe it was just before, I forget, the Pope beckoned in my direction with his finger. It was one of those things where I looked behind me to see who he was calling. The President said, "Joe!" and I realized he was beckoning to me. So I walked up to the Pope, and he held out his hand with the ring. My being a nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn, I took his hand in a hearty handshake and shook it--(Laughter)--not really knowing that I was probably expected to kiss the ring. I kind of knew it, but I couldn't

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bring myself to do it. And the Pope started to say something to me, and all of a sudden the President grabbed me by my right sleeve and pulled me over to the other side, because it turned out later I was in the angle between the President and the TV cameras. Meantime my mother-in-law, she has a little house in the Alps in a small town in northern Italy, and she was watching this live. Just then--in this little town there was one television set there, and she had invited the whole town in there--she said, "There's my son-in-law," and somebody says, just then when I was pulled aside, "There's that idiot pulling him off to one side, out of the camera range." It was kind of one of those things. But the President was a little bit irritated with me, and I don't blame him, for getting in [the picture], but it wasn't my fault.

Anyway, that was the nub of that situation. It was a very successful picture-taking session except that I still get a little pain when I think of having missed that sound, which would have been terribly important, and all the people who saw the moving lips and nothing come out of it. There is such a thing as doing your job too well sometimes.

Oh, let me tell you one other thing. Late that night, in front of the Waldorf, we were having great difficulty with the New York City police, who wanted to keep all of the White House photographers so far away when the President came out of the hotel with the Pope that [they] would have been of no use at all. I was there arguing at one o'clock in the morning with the Chief Inspector of the New York police. We'd attempted to reach the Mayor's office. This guy was being obstinate. I forget his name, but he was a typical old Irish New York cop who had risen to chief inspector, and we were toe-to-toe, he and I, on the sidewalk at one o'clock in the morning in front of the Waldorf. I told him I would certainly go to the Mayor, and finally he said, "Listen, our primary job is to

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protect the Pope and that other fellow with him." I made sure that the whole press found out about that little quote. But this was a typical Irish cop; the visitors were "the Pope and that other fellow."

G: That's a good one.

L: Incidentally, there was one thing I did there. I don't know whether this is pertinent or not. My problem was to make sure that the pool of reporters and photographers, in the movements through the hotel, could get from one place to another, that they could get upstairs where the Pope and the President were meeting. The Secret Service had a problem with the New York police. The New York police, their attitude [is], when they have people like the Pope and the President there, to keep the press away from them, to keep everybody away, [and] get them out of town as fast as you can. Then it's not their responsibility; they wash their hands of the whole thing. They are very difficult for the Secret Service to deal with. Regardless of what the Secret Service will tell you, I know. I went to the man who is the liaison, a man oddly enough with the name of Arthur Godfrey, who was a fine Secret Service agent, but he knew what his limitations were with the New York police. *They* are in charge in New York, and every time I asked him to go to--oh, he was terribly embarrassed with this big fight I had with the Chief Inspector, because it would affect his future relations and all that sort of thing. I would say, "Now, you go back to that Chief Inspector and you tell him this," and I knew he didn't do it.

What I did, in order to insure mobility for the pool, because I knew we would get frozen [and] couldn't do anything, [was that] I asked for a flying wedge of a dozen Secret Service agents accompanied by a representative of the New York City police, and we got

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those and it was ingenious. That was the only way we were able to get them moving around the place.

G: Is that right?

L: Yes. I think I've pretty much told you my whole recollection of that session. I wish that I had sat down and written my recollections right after it happened.

G: You brought up an interesting point when you were discussing the President's pulling you aside on the camera angle. LBJ seems to have been very conscious of camera angles and exposing one side of his face rather than the other, and making sure in the early days that his glasses were off when pictures were being taken and this sort of thing. Were there some considerations here that you want to elaborate on about his consciousness?

L: Yes. It didn't apply particularly to this session, but in general he used to drive me bananas, and a lot of other people. Somebody somewhere along the line had sold him on the idea that his left profile was his best profile, that he was handsomer and so forth and so on. It would just drive me crazy and anybody else who was in charge, always getting the photographers, herding them over on his left side. Frankly, I couldn't see any difference between the right profile and the left profile, but somebody, maybe it was his wife or some woman along the line, [convinced him]. George Reedy probably would be the best man qualified to tell you how it all started. But it was something he [LBJ] was convinced of. Actually I think he just got neurotic about it. It was one of those little things. It was one of his little hang-ups and you just had to play along with it. You had to position TV cameras because of this, everything had to be rigged along those lines and it was hell to pay if you didn't.

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I think one of the reasons that, for instance, Yoichi Okamoto became his personal photographer was that during World War II Okamoto was assigned as the personal photographer of General Mark Clark, who had one thing in common with Lyndon Johnson, and that was an oversized nose. Okamoto was a very good photographer and had learned the best angles, when he was photographing Mark Clark, of minimizing the dominance of the nose. So that when Lyndon Johnson made his first trip to Europe and USIA assigned Okamoto to go with him, LBJ, when he looked at the photographs, suddenly realized that this man knew how to photograph him. That was the beginning of a long and lasting relationship, which was terminated for a period when Okamoto, who was a fine photographer but, like a lot of people, didn't know when to shut up and sit down. So that when he went to the White House, he enjoyed the new prominence of having--which comes to you when you get to the White House--people wait on your every word. He began telling newspapermen about how many rolls of film he was using and how many prints he was making for the President, and the President fired him.

He went back to the USIA, and as a matter of fact when he went back there, he probably would never have gotten back to the White House if I hadn't been sitting in his office one day. I didn't know him all that well, but we had a lot of mutual friends. I forget what I happened to be doing in his office that day when Scotty Reston of the *New York Times* called him. That's a prominent man, James Reston, everybody calls him "Scotty." He [Okamoto] said, "Yes, absolutely. Yes, certainly, Mr. Reston." He said, "Well, I've really made it. Reston of the *New York Times* has invited me to have lunch with him at the Metropolitan Club," which is probably the most prestigious club in Washington, I guess, in terms of power anyway. I said, "You didn't accept the invitation,

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did you?" He said, "Well, why not?" I said, "Listen, why do you think Scotty Reston wants to have lunch with you?" "Well, he just wants to discuss things with me." I said, "Listen, you damn fool, he wants to get the story of why you were fired out of the White House, that's all, and once you start talking to him and telling him these details, you're never going to get back into the place. He's just going to milk you of every last detail of your relationship with the President. If you want to do it, go ahead and keep the luncheon appointment. That's all he's interested in. He's not going to ask you about your great work as a photographer." I got him worried and he cancelled the luncheon appointment. As a result of which, after a period of time--it was interesting, the way Johnson got him back. LBJ later was sorry that he had fired him because he was, if you'll forgive me, cutting off his nose to spite his face. (Laughter)

G: Literally.

L: Literally. Lady Bird knew that he was unhappy that he had vented his spleen over this story which Okie should not have [told]. He should have kept his mouth shut, but he didn't. The President got sore. If he had called him in and said, "From now on, don't talk to newspapermen. . . ." Anyway, Lady Bird sensed this, I'm sure, and so after a period of time she called Okamoto, and she said, "I am having a little affair here with some women. Would you do me a favor and come over here and photograph this for me?" Of course, he was only too glad to do it. Then she asked him to do another thing and another thing, and suddenly before anybody realized it, he was focusing his attention more on the White House than USIA and spending more and more time [there]. After a period of about a year, suddenly, without anybody noticing it, there he was back full-time as the President's photographer.

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Actually he had a very, very good relationship with the President. He had almost total access to everything, including the bedroom, that Nixon's photographer, Ollie Atkins, who died a few weeks ago, told me he never really had. He didn't have that kind of access. So there is probably a better photo record of the Johnson Administration than any administration before or probably since, because Jimmy Carter has indicated he will not have a personal photographer. Ford did have a photographer who did have access, Dave Kennerly, but Kennerly was off in the wilds. He went off to the Vietnam War, so he wasn't there all the time, whereas Okie never left the President's side. He had all kinds of signals with him. For instance, when Okie would take off his own glasses and wave them around to attract the President's attention, he meant he wanted the President to take his glasses off.

G: Is that right?

L: Yes. They had all kinds of codes and signals.

G: Do you remember any others?

L: There were others and I don't remember, but Okie is very available.

Now, there was one other incident I remember. Bill Moyers ripped a flash off the teletype that Adlai Stevenson had dropped dead in London. At that time the President, in the Oval Office, had a large group of visitors there that he was talking to. Moyers did have a sense of the dramatic, especially when he was personally involved. He never missed an opportunity. He had this flash torn off the wire, the teletype machine. He pressed the buzzer, got Okie to come up with his camera. He said, "Look, I am going in to show the President this. He is with some people. Why don't you get in the back of the room and make a hell of a picture, photographing the reaction as he reads this in front of

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this group of people?" So Okie got in first. He [Moyers] waited until he [Okie] got in the back of the room. Moyers then went up to become part of history and showed this to the President, who looked at it, nodded, and gave it back to him. The only trouble with the picture is that you would never know by the picture that he was being shown this flash of the sudden death of Adlai Stevenson. He never batted an eyelash.

G: Is that right?

L: So the picture is now in the archives, but it doesn't register. He didn't twitch an eyebrow in front of all those people.

G: I think there was another occasion of Okie being present when Edward R. Murrow was telling LBJ that he was resigning the directorship of USIA because he had cancer. Do you remember that?

L: I remember the incident, but I was not there in the White House at that time that I remember, and I can add nothing to the story.

G: Do you want to talk about your other advance job on the visit to President Truman?

L: Yes. There were two incidents I recall that might be of any value, one indirectly when I did get out to. . . . There were two separate visits, and one was actually to the Truman Library. I went there and I rather treasure this little incident. I got there, and Truman's office there is a replica of the Oval Office, but I think one--I don't know what the ratio is, it's one-third the size. Everything is exactly in ratio of one-to-three or something like that. I got there a little early, and the President's secretary said to me, "Would you like to meet the President?" Of course I would like to see the President. I was ushered in, and there was Bess Truman sitting on the side of the chair. The President greeted me very



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graciously. We chatted for awhile, and I said to him, "I like this Oval Office better than the real one back in Washington," and he said, "So do I, son. So do I."

(Laughter)

The other thing was a different visit which preceded this one. Incidentally, the one thing that bothered me later--we set up, I think it was the signing of some bill--was when I noticed for the first time that Truman no longer walked, he shuffled. It was really a tug at my heart to see that, this bouncy, feisty guy and he was shuffling. That was the second visit.

The first visit, this is where they met at the Muehlebach Hotel. We were on our way to the United Nations Conference in San Francisco and from San Francisco to the Ranch. George Reedy was then the press secretary. It was a very painful trip in many ways. I had not been there on the job very long, and it was really one of my first experiences. Also what bothered me on that trip [was that] the President was using other people. He was undermining Reedy right and left. It was really quite a humiliating experience, not only for Reedy himself, but for anybody who was sensitive to what was going on, to see what was being done.

G: Do you have any other examples of how he was doing this?

L: Yes, I remember once in the Oval Office when the President called people in. Everybody had been asking Reedy when they were leaving for Texas, and he said, "We're not going this week." Then he [LBJ] called the reporters in and said they were going, five minutes after Reedy told them they weren't, and then said, "I forgot to tell you, George." Why, to treat a press secretary this way is unforgivable! He, over a period of fifteen years, ground George Reedy into a fine powder, and George, since he left, with no help from the

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President or any of the presidential intimates, reconstituted himself into a man and today is doing just beautifully. As you know, I think [he] has written what I consider the most important book that has come out of the White House presidency [?], *The Twilight of the Presidency*, and a couple of other things.

G: You were referring to this instance where Reedy was being undermined, also.

L: On the trip we landed late at night. At the Muehlebach Hotel, Reedy held a briefing on what was going to happen at the meeting. Truman and Johnson were meeting for breakfast in the morning. He had a little press briefing as to what was going to happen. Hours later, about eleven o'clock, the press was unhappy with gaps [in the coverage] and a couple of other things, so Reedy asked me to fill them in with a couple of things, which I did. Then about fifteen minutes [later] Horace Busby called a briefing and told them just contradictory things, which he had been given by the President himself and [who] told [Busby] to hold this briefing. At that time Busby, Valenti, and Moyers were all being played against Reedy. They were breathing down his neck, and all of them were being encouraged in this by the President, for reasons I am not entirely sure of. Valenti finally got out of the running when the President arranged for him to hold some of the briefings down at the Ranch. I will never forget when Valenti called me from down there and said, "Joe, how do I answer this question? How do I answer that?" He was terrified of this briefing. He had this one briefing, and he after that wrote himself out of the running. Then Busby fell out of the running, and Moyers finally, of course, was the victor. Then Busby began breathing down Moyers' neck. But Moyers knew how to take care of himself. He did one very skillful thing. He planted an item in a *U.S. News & World Report* column that he knew the President always read, and he planted in this item

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that Horace Busby was shortly going to replace Moyers as press secretary. He knew that would take care of Busby, which it did. (Laughter)

G: How did you know that he was the one who planted that?

L: Because he told me.

G: Is that right?

L: After it had its desired result, he was so proud of himself; he said, "If you ever tell a soul of this, I'll fire you."

Now Busby, during the days when I was assistant to Reedy, kind of wanted the job. I liked Busby very much. I admired him. I respected him. I kind of liked him. I wish I had developed a closer relationship with him, but in those days the long knives were out all over the place. My first responsibility was Reedy, and I had a genuine respect and regard for Reedy. I did everything I could to protect him, to the point where one day the President arranged for Reedy to take the day off. He told Mac Kilduff, who was still there, "Send him on some errand up to New York." I don't recall what it was. So I was the only one there. That was the day when there was some kind of session up at--at that time the Wardman Park, maybe it was already the Sheraton Park Hotel, where all the intellectuals were gathering. Various people, Morgenthau [?] and a couple of other people, were going to the [teach-in]. They were challenging the policies of the government in Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, and the whole business. Mac Bundy was supposed to appear up there, but he was not going to be there because he had slipped down to meet what's-his-name down in the Dominican Republic, the exiled president.

G: Juan Bosch?

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L: Juan Bosch. You've got a very good memory. Juan Bosch. So how do you explain, when the press would discover that he wasn't there? "Why wasn't he there? Was he afraid to be there?" We tried to keep this meeting with Bosch very, very secret. So I was there to hold the first briefing. Horace Busby came in and said, "The President said that he wants me to run the briefing this morning." I knew I had to make a command decision. If I said, "Okay," and just let him handle the briefing, this was the end of Reedy. I was Reedy's chief deputy. Busby was someplace out in left field. If he took over that briefing, I figured Reedy was through after that. So I said, "Well, Buzz," as we called him, "how are you going to handle the business of Mac Bundy not appearing? They may find out about it by the time of the briefing." "Well," he said, "I don't know." Then I did something which later on [I told to] a man named Bill Carey, who at that time was kind of the permanent under secretary of the Budget Bureau, a dedicated bureaucrat, one of the finest. He was the one person--[when I met him] I suddenly realized that there was such a thing as a dedicated public servant. He later, when I told him of this incident said, "That is why it is important to bring people in at the top into government, because what you did, no trained bureaucrat would have done."

What I did at this moment was, I punched the red button to the President's office, and Juanita Roberts answered. I said, "I must see the President immediately." She said, "Just a minute." [Then] she said, "Come right in." I turned to Buzz, who was a little startled at this, and I said, "Let's go in and put it to the President." We went into the Oval Office and I said to the President, "Here's this difficult problem, and there are several ways of handling it." He said to me, "Well, Joe, how would you handle it?" I told him, "There are two ways of handling it, this way and the other way. If we handle it this way,

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we will have this impact. If we handle it this way, we will have that impact." He said, "Which one do you recommend? I said, "I'd handle it the second way." He said, "Then why don't you do it that way, Joe?" I walked out, and poor Buzz was just so bewildered by this. I went and I held the briefing. Johnson knew exactly what I had done, I'm convinced. I wish that I had done more of it, because if I had done more of it I might have stayed there and gained higher favor. But as a matter of [fact] actually I was doing this for Reedy, not for myself. I probably would have been incapable of doing it for myself, but my need to protect George Reedy was so great that I was able to move in that direction.

Incidentally, there was something I started into yesterday in the previous tape and didn't [finish]. When I told you he humiliated me in front of other people it was during that period, about two weeks earlier. There was a man there named Jim Jones, who is now a congressman, who got into a little trouble on some technicality. He and Hal Pachios were the two bright young men there. Hal Pachios was Bill Moyers' protégé, and Jim Jones was Liz Carpenter's protégé. These were very important little nuances in the White House. I had them both sort of under me, and the two of them did not get along very well together. Because I worked for Moyers, I tended to favor Hal Pachios. That's P-A-C-H-I-O-S, by the way. He is now a very successful lawyer in Portland, Maine.

I couldn't send them both out on an advance because they would clash with each other. At this point, later on, Moyers told me one day that President Johnson said, "Why, when I was at this affair, the only one there was this kid Jones. I don't like him. I don't think he knows what he is doing. Get rid of him." So Moyers said to me, "For God's sake, will you always be present when the President is there at a public function." I don't

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know what happened, [but] within two weeks the President wanted to fire me and Jones was suddenly in the President's favor, and after that just soared right up to the top. I will never be able to understand that. I don't know what happened at all. I have no knowledge of it. There was some hanky-panky going on. I don't know what it was.

I do recall Moyers did not want to go down to the Ranch for Christmas. The President was going down for Thanksgiving and Christmas. He [Moyers] said to me, "Look, why don't we flip a coin and one of us will take one and the other will take the other. [There's] no point in both of us being down there. But I had rather go down Thanksgiving. How about you going down for Christmas?" I said, "Look, if I go down for Christmas, I want to take my family with me. I've got my wife's cousin from Paris staying with us, and I want her to go down, too." He said, "Okay, take everybody down there with you." Which I did. Then, after a period of time, I forget how many days it was, I think it was probably after this luncheon at the Ranch I told you about.

G: We didn't get that on tape.

L: We didn't? Well, that Christmas we went down there, and I was in charge. This was quite an experience for this cousin. She was a beautiful twenty-year-old French girl who was somewhat spoiled. Her parents are fairly well-to-do. She had come here speaking not a word of English. She stayed with us, and the first two weeks--I forget what the problem was--I had just recently gone to the White House and every day my wife was tied up with something. We didn't want to leave her alone, and I used to take her to the White House. She would sit in my office and just watch what was going on. She had never been in the United States before. She showed my wife a letter she was writing home to her parents--no, she telephoned them. The parents wanted to know how she was

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doing. She would say, "I haven't been anywhere. The only thing I've done, every day I go to the White House. The only person I've met is the President." (Laughter)

Anyway, she was down there in Texas with us. I had to be present when he went to church that Sunday. After the service, Clint Hill, the Secret Service agent, came over and said, "The President wants you and Mrs. Laitin to come out to the Ranch with him now for lunch." So we went out there for lunch, and here was this big round table. There were a couple of things I remember, one is we each were given small, burnt hamburgers. Let me put it this way, it was not a gourmet lunch nor one for a person who was terribly hungry. Also, what I remember is that the President made it a point of going around the table, addressing each one, but when he came to my wife, he skipped her and went to the next one. It was almost a case of hate at first sight between the two of them. I don't know whether he sensed the fact--my wife is rather a sophisticated Parisienne and an intellectual to boot, just the kind of a person he couldn't stand. He went for the bunny type, which is about as far as you can get from my wife.

After lunch he decided [to tour the Ranch], as he often did with his guests. As I say, he conspicuously avoided any conversation with my wife at the luncheon table. We all went out, and there were two Lincoln Continental convertibles out there, and he said, "We're going to see the Ranch." Pointing at three or four, he said, "You, you, you, and you come with me. The rest of you go with Bird," as he called her. "The rest of you" was, of course, my wife. (Laughter)

The driver of the other car was J. C. Kellam. So [with] J. C. Kellam driving, Lady Bird and my wife went off in the other Continental while we went off in ours. We got separated. He was driving our car, and he loved to point out the deer. In our car was

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Jack what's-his-name of the *Washington Star* and his wife Leona--Jack Horner. He wrote under the name of Garnett Horner. Jack Horner was the President's lap dog. He would write anything we wanted, and he cooperated [with us]. I must say that when you are on the other side, it is beautiful having somebody like that there. But I also kind of liked him. He later became a thorn in Moyers' side, but every press secretary should have one man like that in the Washington press corps. He pays for it dearly with the others, because the others are often just as unfair as a man like this, who is just willing to write anything we wanted. He got paid off handsomely for it in exclusives and so forth. Anyway, he and his wife were in the car, I remember that.

While we were touring the Ranch, looking at the deer and all that, it became evident from the two-way radio that there was trouble somewhere with the other car. So he picked up the two-way mike, and he said, "S.S., come in." Somebody came in. He said, "What's the trouble?" They said, "The car Mrs. Johnson is in is stuck in the mud over in the northwest corner of the Ranch." He said, "Where is that?" Somebody's voice came in, I'm not sure whose voice it was. For his own sake or hers--I forget whether it was a man's or a woman's voice--it was just as well that he remained anonymous, because the voice said, "It was just the same place, Mr. President, where you got stuck last spring." [The President said,] "I didn't ask you that!" (Laughter)

"What's the trouble? Why can't you get her out?" "Well, we can't seem to. It's stuck in the mud. There's suction there." He said, "You just hold everything. We'll be right there. I'll show you how to get a car out of the mud." We drove over there, and they had been stuck in there for maybe a half-hour or forty minutes. It was not up to the hubcaps, it was up to the floorboards! I looked, and there was my wife and Lady Bird



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and J. C. Kellam stranded in there. You couldn't get out and walk, because first of all you didn't know how deep it really would go. It was like a--what do you call it?

G: Quicksand?

L: Quicksand, yes. So Lyndon Johnson got out of the car, which was parked nearby, and he took charge. I have never seen a more effective ranch foreman in all the time I have been around ranches. He took complete charge, and he was in his element. If he ran the country as well as he ran that operation, we would have been out of Vietnam in thirty days. He took charge, told where to put the ropes on the car, got the right tractors, told them when to put it in low gear, how to tug the thing out, and barking instructions. The Secret Service agents and the farmhands were jumping to his commands. The thing twisted and turned, and finally, gradually, you could see the mud yielding up its prey. Finally it came out, and here was the President of the United States, who probably in all the years he spent in the White House never did anything that he was so proud of, that he was able to strut away from, as this little rescue mission. But *then* he had to top it. He got back in the car we were in. He backed up, and he said, "Here's the way you should have done it." He jammed that accelerator down to the floorboard. We went right through that mud thing. We swerved off to one side, one side lifted, I thought we were going to turn over there, and just at the right moment it righted itself. We just barely made it right through and emerged on the other side. He said, "That's how you should have done it."

G: Did he have to go through the mud?

L: No, he did not! (Laughter) So then we later got back to the Ranch and had what he called whores doves [hors d'oeuvres], if you will pardon the expression, with a little

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drink, all during which he ignored my beautiful wife, Christine. The only ones that were left now were the Horners and the Laitins. Just as we were about to leave, I don't know whether it was a last-minute thought or his conscience bothered him, he said, "Wait a minute, let me give you a few little things here, some tokens." He gave some charms to Leona Horner and to Christine, and he gave gold cufflinks to me and Jack, with the presidential seal in it. He said, "Now, you girls, you go down to a jeweler at the corner of such-and-such a street and such-and-such a street"--the detail that man would go into sometimes--"You go to the jeweler; you tell him I sent you there, and you tell him to engrave in this, 'From LBJ,' with the date." He turned around, and by this time my wife, who was not insensitive to having been ignored all day and resented his, what were really rather bad manners, said in a voice that was a little louder than it needed to be, "He doesn't seriously think I would wear this junk, does he?" At which Leona Horner, with deep resentment and also aware of the fact that my wife was not American-born, said, "Well, when we Americans are given something by the President of the United States, we consider it a great honor, and I will be going down to that jeweler's that he wants me to go to, and I will have that engraved just as he said." She said it with a little edge in her voice.

Anyway, we all got into the car, and it was rather a frosty ride back to Austin. The next afternoon my wife ran into Leona in the lobby of the old Driskill Hotel and said, "Oh, Mrs. Horner, did you go to the jeweler's today and have it engraved?" Leona Horner, who is rather ingenuous, nice but ingenuous, had completely forgotten about the incident the day before [and said,] "Sure, I took it down and the jeweler said he can't

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engrave this, it would turn black." In all fairness to LBJ I want to tell you this, those cufflinks he gave me turned out to be fourteen-carat gold.

G: Is that right?

L: Yes. I still have them. There were several different kinds of trinkets he would give out. Some would be brass and some, God knows what they would be made of. Some were gold. That would go for other trinkets that he would hand out. You had to really have a chemist's test when you left him to find out what your standing was with the President.  
(Laughter)

Incidentally, if I can just wrap this up on the visit there. Moyers came down at some point on this Christmas thing. Moyers said to me, "Why don't you take your family down to Mexico for a little holiday and so forth?" I said, "Look, I am not interested in going down there." It turned out that the President had called him down there and told him to get me out of Austin. I was too embarrassed to tell my wife that our vacation was being cut short, our Christmas vacation. I told Moyers, "Look, I am just staying here unless I am ordered to leave." That did put Moyers into a terribly embarrassing position, because the President told him, "Get Laitin out of here!" I don't know why except it might have been this incident out at the Ranch. Things were difficult for everybody, but I stayed through the thing, and finally we went back. On the way down I had traveled in *Air Force One* and my family had traveled on the press plane. Going back, I went back with the family on the press plane.

That night, it was a very stormy night, I will never forget, and *Air Force One* landed--we couldn't get into Andrews--and it landed at National Airport, which was the first time a Boeing 707 jet had landed at National. It may have been the last time, too. It

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had to be a very skillful operation to land there and it became quite a story. All the aviation trade magazines wanted every last detail of it, and it was quite a thing.

G: They landed it at the Ranch once, didn't they?<sup>1</sup>

L: The 707? I doubt that. I remember going in some detail with General Jim Cross [into] the problems of landing the 707 at the Ranch. He explained to me all the hazards and said, "I would rather you didn't even bring up the subject, it would be that hazardous an operation. Did you see the size of the runways? There are little hillocks or rises in the land on both sides of the runway. [With] a skillful pilot, with the right weather conditions, if everything went right, it could be done. But if the plane just tipped a little bit to the side and one of the wingtips caught on those. . . . It's something as a pilot I would rather not even discuss." That's how hazardous [it was]. So I really doubt that they ever [landed there]. And I would have known about it if a 707 had landed there.

G: Another problem with the Ranch runway was that it wasn't deep enough. The foundation, the concrete below, wasn't thick enough to--

L: --to sustain the weight. But in an emergency that's not too bad. Now I've become more of an authority on matters of aviation because of my last year in the FAA. If the landing was made properly, in other words, if it was the perfect landing, where you bring the whole weight of the plane down without hitting, the chances are that if it could hold a fully weighted Jetstar, it could sustain the impact of one landing, but it might not be able to sustain two landings. That would depend on whether the 707 was fully loaded or not, because there is a hell of a difference. But in an emergency it probably, from a weight

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<sup>1</sup>It was an Electra that landed at the Ranch.

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standpoint, could have held it once. But the problems with the wing tips, if it was not the perfect landing, raises all kinds of problems. In aviation, when you land there are always certain hazards that could develop in any routine landing. It's when a number of these hazards occur at the same time that the thing catches up with you. Anyway, I really doubt that a 707 [landed at the Ranch]. As a matter of fact I would be glad, still having one foot in FAA, to ask some of the people who would still know about it.

G: They probably would. I don't know whether it happened, to what extent the FAA got in. I don't think they got [involved].

L: That landing strip was all kinds of problems, like the time we held our first press conference at the Ranch, televised. One of the San Antonio TV stations had their own airplane, and they wanted to fly some gear in. They wanted to land at the airstrip, and the S.S. [Secret Service] said that they would not permit them to land there. For one thing, the President did not like any planes landing there that might cause him any disturbance in the morning when he was asleep, and they wanted to land there in the morning. The S.S. implied that they would shoot them down if they came there. They [the TV station] called me and said, "Look, we don't want to be unreasonable, but you can't have it both ways. You can't have this as a private airport and a public airport," which of course was the position we took, that it was a public airport. "Now, if it is a public airport, our pilot tells us that you cannot bar us from coming unless you can prove it is a hazard to the President's safety." I finally convinced the Secret Service to let me negotiate with them, to have them land at a little later time, so we worked it out, which shows that you can get

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around these things. That would have been rather scandalous if they had been barred from landing there, which is what the S.S. wanted to do.

G: We were on the Truman visit. Did we ever finish this?

L: No, we never did. I was telling you about how the night before, things were happening there, which was a humiliation, I thought, of Reedy.

In the morning, I was sort of in charge of the breakfast session because Reedy was in there with them. I don't recall whether he was actually having breakfast with them or not. They were having breakfast in a room. The press was outside in the hallway, and beyond that room, down the same corridor, was a living room where the two were going to pose for the historic picture. Of course, in the back of everybody's mind was that this might be the last picture of Harry Truman. But LBJ had ruled that they would have exactly one minute to take pictures. So the photographers said, "Look, in a minute we can do the job, but we have got to know what the conditions are [in] there. Will you take this light meter in and give us the readings in the various parts of the room? [Tell us] what kind of furniture is there, so that when we come in we can have everything set, and we can use that whole minute."

Well, that has never been one of my strong points, reading light meters and so forth, so I said, "All right, I will take the responsibility for it: I will take one of you. Appoint one man to go in, and I will take [him] in there for a minute, take your readings and then you come out with me." Which I did, took [him] in there. Then you had to pass through the open door where Truman and Johnson were sitting down at breakfast. As we came back I said, "Now, when you pass that door, you go fast and don't look in, just

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move past." So I shot him past that door. Then I came in view. I was in view of the President for a split second. He said, "Joe, come here." I came in there. He introduced me to President Truman, and he said, "Joe, how long have you been with government?" I said, "A year and a half, sir." He said, "How long?" "A year and a half." He said, "Oh, is that all?" There was something I had walked into without realizing [it]. I couldn't understand why he was taken aback. Truman turned to me and said, "Just long enough to dislike it, huh?" "No," I said, "it's been a very stimulating experience, sir." Johnson sort of waved his hand, dismissing me. I started to go out and at the door was Jake Jacobsen, who later on got into some trouble down in Texas, and a Secret Service agent, and both of them kind of said, "You damn fool!" as I went out. I went on out and I thought, "What have I done?" When the President of the United States asks you a direct question, you answer it in as short a sentence as you can. He said, "How long have you been with the government?" and I told him. I tried to find these two people on the next leg of my trip to San Francisco. I couldn't find them, and then on the way down to Texas I couldn't find them.

The next day, I remember Busby called me and said, "I'm calling from the Ranch. I just had lunch with the President and he said to me in the middle of lunch, 'You know how long Laitin has been with the government?' I said, 'No.' He said, 'He's been with government only a year and a half, did you know that?'" Busby said to me, "What's the problem?" I said, "I don't know. He called me in when he was with Truman, and I don't know what it's all about. You had better get hold of this agent and Jacobsen." I forget why George Reedy was not involved in this. I remember seeing him sitting on sort of a

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table. Anyway, it turned out that Johnson had been needling Truman about the cronies he had had around him, the politicians, [and] that he [LBJ] had only career people, people who had been with government for long years, reliable, solid people. Just as I passed by, he said, "Now Joe, for instance. You take this new man we've got: Joe, how long have you been with government?" And I say, "A year and a half." And of course, made him feel like a damn fool, and that was what had gotten him. For the next couple of days, everybody that he would talk to, he would say, "Did you know how long Laitin has been with government?" This was one of those curious things.

Now, just to fill in one more thing. We went to the UN, and we had lots of problems there. Again, he did something that I felt humiliated Reedy, who was in on one session he had. They had rambling discussions. I recall Adlai Stevenson was there. Then this fellow from Burma [U Thant?] was there. He was either the secretary general of the UN at the time. . . . Anyway, the whole thing was kind of complicated. He said to Reedy, "Now you tell them everything that went on." Of course, nothing much went on.

There was one other problem there. The teleprompter went wrong there, and there was nothing that would get LBJ furious as when something would go wrong with the teleprompter, that thing that when you are looking right at the camera, you read off the thing. I had many, many unpleasant experiences with that. In one case, where you look through the lens but you are actually seeing--it's a one-way mirror kind of thing. Once right in the White House I was in charge of it, and after he got off the air he called me over and said, "I want you to see what I was looking at, all during that [speech]." I looked in there, and there was the seal of the President of the United States. Something



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had gotten stuck. (Laughter) That was the one time I was grateful that Billy Graham was there, because I am convinced that if Billy Graham wasn't there he would have cussed me eight ways for Sunday, but Billy Graham used to keep him on his good behavior.

G: Is that right?

L: Yes.

G: He was very particular about everything that had to do with his speeches. The podium had to be so high, the teleprompter.

L: *Everything*, measured by the inch. It drove everybody crazy. I don't know why I went into this, but one thing he used to drive me crazy with was the television lighting, which would blind him. Did I tell you about this? I even brought down Broadway lighting experts from New York from the networks to look at it. "What's wrong? What can you do about it? How do you handle this with VIPs?" We got all kinds of advice. We did it. You should see the contraptions that we had developed, which would look like Rube Goldberg devices. Some of the old pictures, if you look at them, they are in them. We had to tell the photographers they must not photograph these contraptions. Once in a while of course somebody did, and it would look like a goddamn--well, it would look like some of the stuff the astronauts would [use], like the car they had up on the moon, with indirect lighting and an umbrella. I am telling you, it would just drive me absolutely crazy.

Once I was talking with Dr. Young, who was the number-two doctor there, and I said, "John, I'm going absolutely crazy with the lighting. There's no pleasing him no matter what I do." We even resorted to devices. We consulted psychologists, and they said, "When you have other bright lights around, you won't notice the bright TV lights."

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We would resort to things like that. Nothing seemed to work, and I was just practically crying to this John Young, who was a very simpatico fellow, [and] so was the number-one doctor, Admiral George Burkley. George Burkley used to feel that I was the best thing that ever happened to LBJ. "Somehow, when you're around, everything goes right," [he said]. I loved the man for it, but in the end it didn't do much good.

At any rate, I said to Young, "This is driving me crazy." "When did all this start,"--this was Dr. Young talking--"about the lights hurting his eyes?" I said, "It started about six weeks ago." He said, "That's very interesting, because that's just about the time when he stopped torturing me for about six weeks [about] how his shoes kept pinching him, no matter what pair of shoes he was wearing."

Incidentally, talking about Jack, John Young, Dr. Young, there was one time he got a very bad sunburn, the President, and Dr. Young came in his room and found him in with his whole face and neck with white stuff over it. He said, "What's that, Mr. President?" He said, "That's mayonnaise." He said, "What have you got that on for?" "Martini"--is that the name of the barber?--"Steve Martini told me that's the old-time recipe from his family to take care of sunburn, so I got a jar of this mayonnaise and smeared it over me." Young said, "I was so mad. I went to Martini, and I told him, 'Look, I won't give the President any haircuts if you stop giving him medical advice.'" Here, the President of the United States has this terrible sunburn, and he goes to his barber to get the old-time family recipe for how they dealt with sunburn back in Sicily.

G: Oh, that's great. (Laughter)

L: One of the other incidents I remember down at the Ranch: We were supposed to take off, going back to Washington. We had an old DC-6. We were supposed to take off about

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six in the afternoon. There was an artist there who was doing a new portrait of him, the guy from New York whose name escapes me at the moment. He was doing a new portrait of him. The President said, "Hold up the plane, because they want to go back to Washington, and I want them to have dinner with me." We were going back because he was coming back. This DC-6 they used to use for transporting Secret Service agents, which infuriated the agents because they were being treated like second-class citizens on a propeller-driven DC-6. It was a bucket-seat job. Only one part of it had what I would call VIP accommodations.

So we waited. We cooled our heels there for God knows how many hours. Finally the word came from the Ranch that this artist and his wife were coming in by helicopter, and we could take off. By this time it was about eleven o'clock at night. Bob Taylor, who at that time was head of the Secret Service detail and a very difficult man to deal with, [was there]. There were two VIP quarters in the back of the plane. There were two tables with chairs. I and Connie Gerrard, who was my secretary and who is still in the White House, by the way, [were using one]. I was dictating memos for the morning. We were working there, and Bob Taylor and some of his agents occupied the other area. I told Taylor that I thought they ought to get into the bucket-seat area and let the President's guests use that area. He said, "My agents are staying right here. If you want to move back into the bucket-seats, fine, but my agents stay right here."

So anyway, they came aboard. They were very gracious about it. "No," they said, "We'll use the bucket-seats." So I left Connie for a while, and I went and tried to be a good host. When I got to know them a little bit, finally he said to me, "I was terribly embarrassed out at the Ranch. I'm doing this portrait of him. He took me into the den to

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show me a portrait of his, hanging over the fireplace in his den at the Ranch. It was done quite a few years ago. He asked me how I liked it. Well, it's terrible to ask one artist what he thinks of another artist's work. The fact is that it's a very bad portrait. It was obviously faded and all the rest of it. I said, 'Well, it was all right in its time.' I was trying to be diplomatic. But then he said to me, 'Would you mind touching it up a bit?'

G: Oh, no!

L: He said, "Could you imagine that, asking one artist to touch up another artist's portrait. I never heard of such a thing."

G: What did the artist tell him?

L: He said, "I told him that my style wasn't the same." He got out of it in some way. This is one of the problems in not putting things down on paper right away. I don't know of what great historical interest it would be to have a Q and A on it. The important thing is that the President asked this artist to touch up this other artist's portrait because there were some things about it that LBJ never quite liked, the one that was in his den at that time. By the "den," I mean the office.

I also remember one other incident there in that den. You couldn't accept any gifts, I guess even then it was over fifty dollars; I thought it was twenty-five. There was a kind of an antique grandfather's clock there, and Jack Valenti said--or maybe it was Marvin Watson, I forget; there was always a special assistant out at the Ranch with him--"Mr. President, we got this antique clock and what shall we do with it? You know there is this rule that we can't accept gifts of more than fifty dollars." LBJ looked at it and said, "I wouldn't pay more than fifty bucks for that thing." (Laughter) End of story.

G: That's great.

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L: Now, there are a lot of other instances that this recalls to me. I suppose rambling is just as good a way [as any to do this].

G: Go ahead.

L: At the time, there was a presidential commission called the Selective Service Commission of which Burke Marshall was the chairman. George Reedy was a member of the commission. I was assigned sort of to handle their PR, even though I was back at the Budget Bureau then, but that was one of those things, that LBJ would kind of use me as his spy at the operating level. He would always have a spy on the commission. This happened a couple of times, including the Eisenhower Commission. It was a very effective way of doing things. Anyway, one day Drew Pearson had a whole column, a leak of what the commission was planning to do. LBJ called Burke Marshall, who had been the assistant attorney general during the Kennedy Administration. Now he was on a leave of absence from IBM or something. Anyway, he was chairman of the Selective Service Commission. He [LBJ] raised holy hell with Marshall. He said he wanted to find out where that leak came from and that was his responsibility.

Burke Marshall came to me. He said, "You have got to help me. I have got to find out how that column was leaked to Drew Pearson. I am under direct orders from the President." So I said, "Okay. Didn't you give a confidential report of this to the President?" He said, "No. I gave it to Califano," who has now just been appointed secretary of HEW by Carter. I said, "Did it have all the points that [are in the Drew Pearson column]?" It was not Jack Anderson at that time; it was Drew Pearson, now that I think of it, of course. He said, "Yes, but I called Califano and Califano said he never even looked at it. He sent it right down to the Ranch." So I called down to the Ranch

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and I got Marie Fehmer, who was the President's secretary. I said, "Can you look up the schedule? Did he talk to Jack Anderson or Drew Pearson"--I forget who it was--"on such-and-such a day?" She looked this up. She said, "No, but Jim Jones did," who was the special [assistant] who was on duty that day. I said, "Thank you very much, Marie."

I called Burke Marshall. I said, "Burke, I would suggest you forget the whole matter." He said, "What do you mean? I am under direct orders. We have got to find the person who leaked this story." I said, "I can tell you who leaked it. Now, if you want to"--he said, "Who did?" I said, "The President leaked it." He said, "What do you mean, the President? He's the one who told me to track it down." I said, "That's right. The thing for you to do is to call him and say, 'We simply cannot crack it. All we can do is promise you it will never happen again.'"

This was not untypical of the way things used to happen. He was the biggest leaker in the White House. It was only because of my background in the White House and knowing the right people to call, and putting two and two together that I was able to [track this down]. And here was a very sophisticated man like Burke Marshall, who probably to this day does not believe me. Yet he relaxed a little bit, and finally did what I told him to do. The President told me, "This better not happen again." I said, "We're tightening up on security, Mr. President." (Laughter)

G: You think that Jim Jones did it with his instructions?

L: Absolutely! Jim Jones would certainly not do anything like that without the explicit orders of the President.

G: Did you say everything you wanted on the Truman visit?

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L: I would say, all that I could remember about it. There was one other incident that I want to tell you. That was the second time when we were leaving. Truman drove down to the airport on his own, as I recall it, to say goodbye to the President at the airport. When he came to the airport, the accompanying press, Merriman Smith, Doug Cornell, who were the two old-timers on the beat, when Truman came there alongside of *Air Force One*--I don't think he even had the Secret Service at that time to drive him; he drove himself, or Bess was driving, and in this old car, this ancient car, that he had--Doug Cornell and Merriman Smith, these fellows, together with a few other fellows, they dropped Johnson and they all went to Truman and surrounded him. Johnson's nose was really out of joint. At that time, the words were etched in my memory. Maybe Cornell will remember this. But he said, "I guess you have to be an ex-president before the reporters love you," some remark to that effect, and that may very well have been exactly what he said. I just don't recall.

That's just one of those things that fades from one's memory. Merriman Smith, of course, he's dead. He killed himself. Anyway, you ask Doug, who is now married to Helen Thomas. I don't think she was on that trip. I know she was not on that trip. But he was very miffed. Johnson wanted to be loved, but he was not a very lovable guy. I remember once, remember that dog Sukie or--

G: Yuki.

L: Yuki. He was kind of a mongrel. Somebody said to him [LBJ] once--he was crazy about this dog--"Why do you love this dog so much?" Johnson, without realizing what he was saying maybe, [said,] "Because he loves me." Which is probably much more revealing

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than he intended it to be. I really doubt whether anybody except Lady Bird ever really loved Lyndon Johnson.

G: One of the things I wanted to go back to and ask you, you talked about Jack Horner. Do you recall any particular stories that he helped you out on or you planted with him, or examples of how he served as your ally in the White House?

L: Well, it was terribly naive of me. The first few days I was in the White House there was an exclusive story he had on the front page of the *Star*. All the rest of the press besieged me with inquiries, could I verify this thing? I checked around the White House. Nobody of the staff could confirm it or would give me any help at all. Finally Jack Horner heard that I was going around trying to verify it. I said, "Look, I can't find any verification for it." Now whether he was afraid of having the story knocked down or not, I don't know, but he heard about my inquiry, and he came around to me. He pulled me aside and he said--I was the new kid in the White House--"Joe, the President himself gave me that story." I thought he was pulling my leg. It turned out that the President indeed had given him the story and many stories after that. The only way to confirm a story like that was to ask the President. But once I got the idea, I could handle the situation.

On another occasion--this one infuriated Moyers, with good reason, too. He [Horner] used to spend a lot of time with his wife. His wife would always accompany him down to Texas, and the President would invite him out on that lake. What's the name of that lake?

G: Lake LBJ.

L: Yes, Lake LBJ. And that speedboat, he loved that speedboat. He would invite Horner out there all the time, and his wife. One day Horner took a camera with him. He took a



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lot of pictures, and he showed the pictures to LBJ and said, "Can I use these pictures in the *Star*?" LBJ said, "Sure." They were dreadful pictures. They showed LBJ at the wrong angles, and there was one picture that made him look like a corpse. Anyway, there was a big full-page spread of exclusive pictures in the *Star*. I've never seen Bill Moyers as furious, and as I say, with good reason. He told Horner that if he ever pulled anything like that without going through him that would be the end of his palmy days around the White House. Moyers sometimes could make something like that stick. I told you they called him Mack the Knife. It may have been Bess Abell or somebody else who said that he always walked around with a rusty razor blade under his coat.

G: Who were Moyers' allies?

L: I think everybody pretended to be his ally on the surface, because they were terrified of him, except George Reedy. Everybody played along with him because they were terrified. Bess Abell once told me that she was absolutely terrified of running afoul of Moyers. It was almost a baby Reign of Terror.

Now finally [Marvin] Watson kind of outmaneuvered him. I got this from Bill Moyers' brother James, who died. I don't know what the circumstances there were, but there was something about his death that still hasn't been fully explained to me; maybe my memory is faulty. I remember once we were flying back from Honolulu, and I sat next to James in the press plane. He was a rather warm guy. He was telling me how much he and his brother hated Marvin Watson from the days back in Texas.

I remember going to the funeral of James, and Marvin Watson was one of the pallbearers. By this time he was postmaster general. I looked at Bill Moyers, and I couldn't help thinking, "What a hypocrite." I had no reason to doubt what Jim Moyers

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had told me about [how] he and his brother despised Watson. I had reason, which I will tell you about later, to believe that this was shared, no question about it, by Bill. There was one time when he told a cover-up story about Marvin Watson. I remember when he came into the office, and he hurled a bottle of paste or something across his press office against the wall, and it broke. He said, "Whoever thought that I would sink so low as to have to lie for Marvin Watson." This had something to do with the phone calls that came in. Everything had to be referred to one person. It was a way of screening calls. Probably somebody will start telling you about this.

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L: LBJ was just crazy about this speedboat. I was never on it with him. He also had another gadget. He was really gadget happy. He had this thing that was a--

G: The amphicar.

L: The what?

G: The amphicar.

L: Is that what you call it? He would love to have people in it and just, making believe he was distracted, drive it right into the lake at a certain place. They were startled, and of course it would go off as a little motorboat. There was nothing new about that, the military even used those in World War II, the giant carriers, I forget what they call them. But he loved to take people on this speedboat and really go skirting across that lake, and of course the Secret Service would be [worried]. They were always worried he'd hit a log or something.

G: Did they ever try to restrain him, when he was speeding in that boat?

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L: Not to my knowledge. Secret Service would try to do a lot of things that sometimes they would get away with. For instance, I asked Jim Cross, the pilot, "What would you do if you didn't think it was the proper weather to take off in, and the President said he wanted to take off?" He said, "I am the commander. I would decide," but it wasn't true. I had reason to believe that he was terrified of the President, and that's why I question that 707 [story]. Well, not because of that, no, that's contradictory. It's not *why* I would question the 707, I did that under the ground [?]. I believe that he might, except that he was so terrified I don't think he would.

For instance, there was always one thing he insisted on. When he got into a plane or a helicopter, when that door closed, that plane had to start rolling. The helicopter had to take off. Once at the Ranch he got into that helicopter, and he would get a pilot that was so scared. In this case, he got into the helicopter, slammed the door, and the helicopter took off, but they'd forgotten to detach the telephone line. Fortunately, these helicopters are so powerful it just ripped this line, and there it went off with this twenty feet of telephone line dangling behind the helicopter.

The only other thing I can think of in connection with the helicopter [is], we were flying from Andrews back to the South Lawn. Evans and Novak that morning had carried a column--it was the only time they ever mentioned my name, and they were blasting me about something I had done. I will tell you this: in looking back, I had it coming to me, too. I was wondering what he was going to say when he saw it. He didn't get around to it all day. But he's sitting in that helicopter with his hat tilted back on his head and I was sitting on the other side. I saw him turn to the op-ed page in the [*Washington*] *Post*, and he started reading the Evans and Novak story blasting me. I

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thought, oh boy, that's going to come down on me. I remember just as we were passing the Washington Monument--it always bothered me at night coming past that Washington Monument; I thought, what do you do in a fog--he finished reading. He leaned over to me and he said, "Joe, don't let those bastards get you down." That's the only warmth and affection he ever showed to me in all the time I was there.

Now that blasted column, by the way, the reason for it was one time at a press conference, beforehand Moyers said to me, "Listen, the President doesn't want to volunteer this, but he wishes that somebody would ask him the question--"

G: Right, we have that on already.

L: Oh, we do have that on.

G: The story thing?

L: Yes.

G: Yes.

L: Did I also tell you the aftermath about the guy from the *New York Times*?

G: Yes.

L: Okay, fine.

G: The planted answers.

L: The planted answers. You have a remarkable memory. It's too bad you weren't in the LBJ White House. But this Evans and Novak column about how I was going around trying to plant all these questions.

G: One thing that you mentioned a few minutes ago, and I wanted to get you to elaborate on this, the dislike that the Moyers brothers had for Marvin Watson. You never did get to the nub of that to explain why.

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L: It had to do when they both worked on a newspaper, maybe it was the *Marshall News Messenger*. Marvin Watson was a lobbyist of some kind who came in and demanded that certain editorials be written. I guess that the two Moyers boys in those days were very idealistic people. Moyers in some ways is still like that, except he's learned how to commercialize his idealism. But there was a deep-rooted hatred of Marvin Watson that I sensed in his brother James, which he said was shared by Bill. Then later, when I told you this incident of hurling this bottle of ink or paste or something across [the room], there was fury there. To think that he had sunk so low that he had to lie for Marvin Watson.

G: Can you elaborate on the one person taking the telephone calls?

L: It was so clear to me a couple of years ago. It has something to do with screening all calls. You could not call people on the staff directly, newspapermen couldn't. It was something on this. I'm trying to think of who would be a better man. Bring it up in other conversations with people that were there. At the moment I'm pretty fatigued.

G: Marvin Watson was the man who cleared calls, is that right?

L: He or somebody in his charge. He wanted to know who's talking to who. He also had the reputation, by the way, of cutting expenses by eliminating phones. In one office he cut out--there was nobody using the office, and he cut off all the phones, which incidentally led to a rather amusing incident. During the negotiations when the White House came in--was it the steel strike or the railroad strike? I forget--where Califano was very much involved in this. Califano might remember some of this. But Califano decided that both sides, labor and management, wanted to consult with themselves and with their principals, so he left the management people in his office, and he put all the

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labor people in the other office. He said, "Call anybody you want." Of course they discussed, and they picked up the phones and they were all dead. They thought it had been done deliberately. Marvin Watson had cut off the phones to save money! His motives were fine, but this niggardly approach to things. He was appalled, Marvin Watson, at some of the estimates of fixing the roof. He said, "Down in Texas I could get this done for one-tenth the price." I kind of admired him for his attitude, and yet--the White House is going through some of that now--you started getting different bids and the quality of the material is different. You just can't get involved too much in those nickel and dime operations, but he was.

No, I tried to get Marvin Watson there to--he was sort of the monster of the White House, the appointments secretary, as far as the press was concerned. He wouldn't take their calls; he wouldn't talk to them. And so the press has its ways of striking back. They're terribly unfair, but it's the only weapon they've got. Anytime anything went wrong, anybody was doing something wrong, without even trying to figure out who it was, they blamed it on Watson. So he became gradually the monster of the White House, to the point where it began to bother him. He came to me and he said, "What can I do about"--what we now call improving our image, but I forget what he [called it]--he said, "I'm not that bad a guy." I said, "Look, the thing to do then is, why don't you go out to lunch with some of these guys once in a while to show them that you're a nice guy?" He said, "That's your job." I said, "I know it's my job. But if you went to lunch with them once in a while they'd see you're flesh and blood and you can laugh. It's much harder to attack in print a man that you've had lunch with. No guarantee that he won't, but it sort of cuts your losses." He said, "Well, that's not the way we used to do it at Lone Star Steel."

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I said, "Marvin, maybe that's what your problem is. You're not at Lone Star Steel now.

This is the White House." And that may well have been one of Marvin Watson's problems.

G: Did you ever see any evidence of him as a hatchet man? I suppose as appointments secretary he wielded a lot of power.

L: Yes, he did. Yes, he was the point man, there's no question about it, in that place. He was the hatchet man. Although when I finally got fired he came in to see me. He said, "I don't understand. I don't know what all the shooting is about. You're one of the most valuable people here, and I don't understand why they're letting you go." It was very nice of him to come in and say this, but he may very well have been involved. I doubt whether he was involved in it.

I remember that the day I was leaving there, Moyers called me at home and said, "Look, he's just having a press briefing. He'd like to announce that I'm [you're] to become special assistant to Sargent Shriver." He wanted me to take that job, and after I had spent an hour with Sargent Shriver at his behest. He didn't want it to look as though I was going back to where I came from, being thrown back into the pond. He called me--I still had the hot line in the house--and he said, "In five minutes I'm having the press briefing. The press is coming in. Can I announce that you are going over there?" I said, "I tell you what, I'll go along with that." I had sort of become part of that little power complex, I suppose. I said, "I'll go along with that on one condition." He said, "What's that?" I said, "That the President announce it to the press." "That is the one thing I can't do, Joe. But why won't you go to work for Sargent Shriver?" I said, "I can think of only one thing that I dislike more than being a press agent in government, and that is being a

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press agent to a press agent." Maybe I was being unfair to Shriver, but I was really more angry at Moyers for not having put up more of a fight and defending me, with what I considered unwarranted abuse from the President and at a public humiliation.

Anyway, I went back to the Budget Bureau. Once I was back there, of course, the President was using me. Half my time was with him. Then I told you the rest about going back there and all that.

Finally, I was not invited down to the dedication of the Library, and neither was George Reedy. I always felt that the reason I wasn't invited down there was that I was identified too much with Reedy. I've heard that it was Mrs. Johnson, because of that book she wouldn't ask Reedy down. I was identified with it. About two days before, I ran into George Christian, who said, "Well, we'll see you down in Texas." I said, "No, you won't." He said, "Why not?" I said, "Because I wasn't invited." He said, "Well, I'll see to it that you get invited." I was not invited.

Do you want me to erase that from the tape?

G: No.

Let's talk about the first time you talked to LBJ from a car.

L: This was kind of a weird experience. I was still in awe of the president, particularly LBJ. I didn't have what they called limousine privileges, and in this particular case I don't know how I finagled it. It was late and there were certain loopholes that you could work. Sometimes I would bluff it out and I would call the sergeant in charge of the motor pool and--you know the way the sergeant was--you'd say, "Sergeant, this is Mr. Laitin. Send a car over here." If the sergeant was new on the job or something, and you emphasized the



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"sergeant," he would remember what the relationship was and he'd send the car for you.

Those things worked there the same way they do anyplace else.

Anyway, I was driving home. We were going up Reno Road [?], which is a rather narrow road, lots of traffic. Not the telephone, but the speaker in the car [which] was a private line, rang. The driver said, "It's the President, sir." The idea of talking on this--it's not just a telephone, it was "over and out," that kind of business, a one-way channel. It was the President, raising hell with me over the UPI ticker at that point. There had come a story which said that starting on Monday, the Boyhood Home would be open to fee, F-E-E tours. He said, "That's a deliberate--insinuating that we're going to charge to let the public go through the Boyhood Home. That's outrageous." I had the temerity to suggest to the President, while looking at the traffic--here's the traffic going by, stopping for red lights, being very conspicuous in this car, holding this microphone, and people were looking in. I thought, geez, if they knew I was talking to the President of the United States, how astonished they would be, just as astonished as I was. I had the temerity to suggest that it was just a typographical error, that really the word "fee" was "free." He said, "Well, as soon as you get home, you call the UP," and so forth.

Anyway, when I got home I found he beat me to it, he called the UP. (Laughter)

G: Is that right? He really watched that ticker, didn't he?

L: He watched that ticker to the point that the bureau chief once suggested to me, "Listen, he calls up with corrections before the story is completed on the wire. Why don't we take that UPI teletype machine out of the office and put one in with a keyboard so when he sees a story coming in he doesn't like he can just cut in and say "correction," and let him

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type out his own correction that goes out over the whole circuit. It will save everybody a lot of trouble."

Between that and the three television sets he had in the office, plus copy that he would have sent in, Agence France Presse and Reuters, I don't know how that man had time to do anything else. In sharp contrast to that, of course, was Nixon who never read anything. I tell you, between the two I'll take LBJ, obviously.

Anyway, there were a couple of other odds and ends. Once he took me to the home in which he was born--I'm awfully sorry that I did not [make a record of it]--I remember with the breezeway. It was rather a pleasant visit when he even got a little sentimental about little things there. The two of us were alone there. I wish I had made a record of it, but I don't [have one]. The thing has just blown my mind. But it does recall one other thing, and that was a press conference at the Ranch.

After the press conference we had a bus there that brought in all the press. We loaded the correspondents on the bus so that they could go back to Johnson City where we had communication facilities. He beckoned to me and he said, "Look, Joe, I want you to take them out by way of this road." I forget the [name]. We had names for the different roads to get out. "You take them by the cemetery. Stop by the cemetery. I want them to see where my parents are buried," and so forth and so on. He felt very sentimental about the cemetery, where of course he is now buried himself. I said, "Yes, sir," and got in the bus. I said to the driver, "We want to go down that road," and it was twice as long to get out that way. The press rather irreverently said, "Who the hell wants to go past the cemetery? We wanted the short route out. We want to get back to town. We won't have time to write and file our stories." I yielded to the pressure. They were

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quite reasonable about it. I just thought LBJ was kind of being nice to them. He wanted them to go the scenic route. I didn't realize how really strong he felt about their seeing the cemetery. Anyway, we went out the other way and he called me back in Austin and raised holy hell with me.

G: What did he say? Do you remember?

L: Not the exact words. All I can remember is he just pinned my ears back about not having taken them past the cemetery.

G: Did he give you a chance to explain why you didn't?

L: He never gave you a chance to explain anything. Oh, I told him. I said, "Mr. President, they had to file their copy," and all that. I don't remember his ever referring to the press as the press. I think I may have mentioned to you earlier. The only recollection I ever had he would always refer to "those shitfaces." That was the way he referred to the press, the ones that covered the White House.

(Laughter)

Now, let me just go on to a couple of other things. He once called me at six-thirty in the morning at the Driskill, woke me up, and said, "What do you think of that newscast on the six o'clock CBS show? Did you hear Tony Sargent?" I said, "No, sir. I wasn't listening." He said, "What happened to that little Sony radio I gave you?" Now, a couple of months earlier WAVA, which is the all-news station--it's run by somebody who apparently he knew, with political connections--had sent over to him a whole box of little Sony radios about two by two inches. I've still got that one here. It doesn't work anymore, but I would like to get it fixed at any cost, for just sheer sentimental reasons. This guy had given them to him to give to his staff. With it came a little card about all

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the WAVA news broadcasts, but you could throw that away. I got one delivered by Marvin Watson personally with a little card saying, "It is the President's pleasure that you will have this little Sony." I was rather touched by it.

This morning at six-thirty or six-fifteen I said, "No, sir, I didn't hear it." He said, "What did you do with that little Sony radio I gave to you?" I said, "Well, I've got it, sir." He said, "Well, don't you use it?" I said, "Yes, sir." You know, if you don't use it he'd say, "I'd like to have that back." I said, "Well, sure I use it." He said, "Why weren't you listening to the 6:00 a.m. newscast?" I said, "I was doing some other things, sir, and I don't normally listen to the 6:00 a.m. I pick it up at the 7:00." He said, "I gave you this little Sony radio. Now look, I can use that, if you can't; I can find somebody who can make better use of it." He just needled me on this, that he had given me months before. I didn't even think that he knew that he had given it to me.

This reminds me: Tony Sargent, the young man that would only do the radio newscasts, would occasionally go with us down there. He was a rather good-looking young man, six feet tall, wet behind the ears at that time, but a bachelor. One day Tony Sargent called me and said he had a little problem that he wanted to discuss with me. I said, "Sure," and he came over. He said several times the President called him over and had invited him to stay at the Ranch. It became quite obvious he was trying to promote a romance between him and his secretary, named Vicky [McCammon McHugh]. He wanted my advice. He said she didn't really appeal to him, but at the same time it was a way of getting exclusive stories. He said he didn't think that was very moral to go on this way, and what should he do. I sort of tried to be a Dutch uncle. I said, "In the long run it really is not ethical to cultivate this thing in order to get exclusive stories. At the same

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time, you can't keep saying no to the President." He said, "What will I do?" I said, "Well, Tony, old boy, that's your problem. But I'd be very careful how I handled this one." I don't know how he extricated himself. I think he got himself assigned to Vietnam shortly after that, which was really going to great lengths to extricate himself from the problem, if that is indeed what he did.

Which also reminds me of the chief steward, a man named Whitey, aboard *Air Force One*, who just used to be driven crazy by the President, to the point where once he passed me by after coming out of the President's little compartment and said, "I wish I'd never met him and I wish he never knew my name." Now, he did indeed ask to get reassigned to Vietnam. Yes. Whether it was that or he wasn't getting along with his wife, I don't know, but he did finally get himself off that plush job as the steward on *Air Force One* to Vietnam.

While we're on *Air Force One*: I was very flattered by the fact that Moyers always wanted me to travel on *Air Force One*. I thought, God, the great confidence this man Moyers had in me, he always pushed me forward to LBJ. Whenever I would give him an idea that the President ought to do, he would take my idea if he liked it and send it in to the President with a covering note saying, "I think Joe's idea was great. We should go ahead on this." I had never worked with a guy like that who would not plagiarize my idea if it was a good one, or if it was a bad one blame it on me. He pushed me forward, gave me all the credit for my ideas, and I was so flattered that he earned my loyalty. It was my wife Christine that knew all along, that saw through this. I didn't at the time. Because with hindsight I realized that he was trying to push me forward with the President to take all the heat, so he could pay attention to his real constituents, who were

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the press. The press never knew what I did, really. So he always wanted me to travel with *Air Force One* so that he could travel on the press plane, to make some time.

In this particular case I got a telephone call on *Air Force One* from the press plane. You could talk back and forth on the phone; usually they would be no more than five or six miles apart. He said, "Joe, on some pretext, get into the President's quarters on the plane. Look around without being obvious about it for the current issue of *Harper's*"--I forget what it was, the March issue or whatever. It had a story by Tom Wicker in it--"and whatever the cost, get that thing out of there, even if you have to jump out the of airplane with it. Tear it up. Don't let him see it." I did find an excuse to go in, and when he wasn't looking I got the copy of *Harper's*, smuggled it out under my coat, and I couldn't resist opening it up. There was a story by Tom Wicker. It was about Moyers. The title of the story was "Mr. White House," as I recall.

G: Is that right?

L: It's very easy to check on it. But he knew that would drive the President right up the wall. I forget whether the text with it was all that laudatory, but there was a story, a profile about Bill Moyers, and the title of it was "Mr. White House." He knew what was going to happen if the President saw that. It's interesting with the President, no matter how much he tries to keep in touch with the people, it's that easy to keep certain things away from him. He never did, to my knowledge, ever see that copy of *Harper's*.

Did I also tell you about that story, the quote, when I got Jack Valenti to throw away that AP story? I told you that. There again, I'm to this day shocked at the fact that you can keep certain things away from the President of the United States that sometimes he really ought to know. Now let me go on and cover just a few other things.

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We never did discuss the humor group. Liz Carpenter at some point decided--somebody decided, maybe it was the President himself; he was quite capable of that--that he wanted to get in a few light touches into his speeches. So Liz Carpenter started what came to be known as the humor group. Once a week, at five o'clock, we would gather in her office in the East Wing, and she would put a bottle of Cutty Sark on the table and sit at the typewriter, and we would all talk. She would have the speech, where he was speaking for the next week. We would come up with humor. I'll say [of] Liz Carpenter, she herself I suspect really doesn't have any humor, but boy she's a master of extracting it from other people. I would come over there dead tired and I thought, well, today I really don't have anything to contribute, and I would somehow sparkle. I will give Liz Carpenter all the credit, and the Cutty Sark, of course.

Those in the humor group in those early days [were] myself; Peter Benchley, who later became rich and famous as the author of *Jaws*, who didn't contribute all that much to the humor group. He was a much too sophisticated and serious-minded young man. I was very fond of the guy, but he never really contributed very much to the group; Ben Wattenberg, who has since also become quite famous; and oh, what's the name of him. He's with the Tobacco Institute now. I must give him credit. He didn't contribute much, but one thing he contributed was terrific. Oh, I must give you his name.

G: Fred Panzer.

L: Fred Panzer was the guy. At that time he used to get on my nerves a little bit, I don't know why. And I must say, I didn't think much of his contribution, but there was one thing he gave. There was a speech honoring George Meany up in New York, a presidential speech. At that time Levy's [?] rye bread had a big slogan, "You don't have

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to be Jewish to appreciate Levy's rye bread." He got this line about Meany, "You don't have to be Jewish to love George Meany," which was just great.

What would happen is that Liz would take down everything as it came up. We were just talking wild. Then she would gradually squeeze it down and edit it. Ben Wattenberg would then take it into the President's office. At that time Ben used to cultivate the press corps, he loved publicity. Ben Wattenberg was brought in by Moyers because of some book he had done that Moyers liked, and he brought him down there as a speech writer or something. Anyway, one day one of the group discovered that Ben Wattenberg was retyping it in his office, and in the upper right hand corner he put "from Ben Wattenberg," and he would deliver it to the President. The President was going around telling everybody what a great humorist Ben Wattenberg was. I found out about it because he, Ben Wattenberg, was going to the press and telling them, "You notice these light touches on the President's speeches?" He was masterminding it. A couple of us went to Liz Carpenter and said, "Look, we are perfectly willing to remain anonymous, but not if Wattenberg was going to be taking bows all over the place." And to Liz's credit, she really burned Benny Wattenberg's ears about that, and from then on she would deliver the stuff herself.

Oh, Charlie Maguire was there too. Maguire was a rather interesting guy. He used to take everything so literally. He became sort of the whipping boy, taking some of the heat off Jack Valenti. He was the kind of guy that was easy to be a whipping boy because he took himself and the job and everything so seriously. Like the time he was moving from one office to another. He would always get flustered when the President would call him. One day he was moving from one office to another; all his things weren't



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there yet, just his desk. The President had called him because he used to pass the papers along from--what's his name, the fellow who used to be president of NBC and ABC?

G: Kintner?

L: Bob Kintner, yes. One day there was a document that went up to him, and the President thought it had the wrong date on it because it was the end of the month. So the President called first Kintner, and he wasn't there so he called for Charlie Maguire, who was in this new office. He said, "Charlie, I got this paper here. What month is this?" Charlie said, "I don't know, Mr. President. My calendar isn't on my desk yet." The President [said], "Jesus Christ, I've got an assistant here who doesn't know what month it is unless he's got a calendar on his desk!" But Charlie Maguire was always getting himself into situations like that.

So much for the Washington humor group that I can remember at the moment. LBJ used to love that stuff. I will tell you this, that he would take a fair line and make it a good one. He would take a good line and make it a great line. His delivery was terrific. I enjoyed doing that.

Now, can we go to the night of Luci's engagement, which is Christmas Eve? I was in charge then. The press had revolted at that time. LBJ wanted them all herded together in the Driskill Hotel. He always liked to think that the press was under complete control in the bullpen. He'd lock them up every night if he could have done it. He wasn't very happy about their being in Austin, which was why they finally moved to San Antonio.

G: Why was this?

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L: Because the state capitol was there, and they were talking to the politicians and he didn't want them to do that, just as he didn't want them in Johnson City. He didn't want them talking to all his old neighbors, many of whom didn't like him, and they'd gossip about the old times and all that sort of thing. So as long as they were in Austin he wanted them cooped up in the Driskill. They broke away to another hotel, and he gave orders that they were not to be notified of any sudden news developments. We could only do it in the Driskill. So these guys, they were all on golden time. They had money to throw around like it was going out of style, all the news media. So they put in, at their own expense, a direct line between this other motel and the Driskill. They even had somebody to trigger that line, when to call them over there all of a sudden. So that was the way it was.

This was Christmas Eve, and the only restaurant open was an old Italian restaurant on the outskirts of Austin. So at that time when we were out of town, the White House press always wanted the press secretary, the acting press secretary, to have dinner with them. It was kind of a security blanket. They knew as long as the press secretary was having dinner with them [that] they could relax and enjoy themselves, because you always had two-way radio and communication. You left word where you were; if there was any news break you were right there, and you would get picked up and carried back. So considering the fact that our food allowance, I think, was twelve dollars a day, you never turned down a dinner invitation.

But this was a special occasion. It was Christmas Eve. I remember Helen Thomas [was there], and of course I told you my wife was there and my wife's cousin, and Marian [Muriel Dobbin?]-from the *Baltimore Sun*.

G: Marianne Means?

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L: No, Miriam--she's being transferred to San Francisco now. She was the Scottish woman that was assigned to the White House. She used to be a newspaperwoman in Scotland and came here, Miriam--

[Interruption]

There we were, there must have been twenty of us, and it really was a nice bunch at this way-out-of-the-way place. What I had done is taken along with me a two-way radio in the White House car with the Secret Service headquarters, but I also left word where I was. In the middle of this--and we all felt a little bit--you know, we were huddling together. Here it was Christmas Eve, none of us home, and here [we were] in this rather second-rate Italian place. It was a mom-and-pop thing. Actually it was kind of nice.

The woman who ran the place, this Italian woman, came over and said, "Telephone call for you, Mr. Laitin. Are you Mr. Laitin?" "Yes." I got on the phone, and it was Liz Carpenter calling from Washington. She said, "Joe, I've got something confidential to tell you. Can we talk in private?" I said, "Yes, I'm at the cash register counter," and everybody's eyes are on me, right close to the table. So I said to the woman, "Do you have another phone?" "No." I said, "Well, I've got to talk in privacy." "Well," she said, "there's a long cord here, you can go into the freezer." So with the long cord, I went into the freezer. She [Liz Carpenter] said, "Better take out a pad. You're going to have to make an announcement down there." So here in the freezer I began taking [notes]. There was only a dim light, it was a walk-in freezer. She was giving me the worst. She said, "Pat Nugent just asked the President for the hand of Luci, and he's given consent." This was out at the Ranch. I am [the one] close by, but we always had an understanding that the love life of the daughters was her responsibility. I said, "Well,

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Liz, why don't you announce it up in Washington?" She said, "No, they're down there. You should announce it down there." I said, "You dictate to me what to say, and I'll give them the statement." So she dictated this thing to me.

I said, "Look, I don't know when or how I'm going to be able to do this." [She said] "Well, you call the press together." I said, "Half the press are right here. The other half are out God knows where." She said, "You'd better go back as soon as you can to the hotel, and you call a press conference." I said, "Do you realize this is on Christmas Eve at midnight? If I send out word I'm calling a press conference, they'll all assume there's some major development in Vietnam. What else can they think? It may start a panic around the country." She said, "You do what you think you should do, but the President wants it announced from there." What she didn't tell me, as it turned out, she'd already told the [*Washington*] *Post* about it, and she was afraid of being caught with giving one paper an exclusive. She may well have told the [*Washington*] *Star*, but she wanted the stuff out.

So I finally hung up. Incidentally, I had left the phone; I had gone out to the car thinking I could talk on a patch outside. As it always happens with these wonderful gadgets, when you really need them, the battery's dead, which it was. So I came out and everybody says, "What is it?" I said, "We've got to go back to the hotel." Well, we got the check, and I don't even know who paid the check. We were almost finished with the meal, and we all had wine. It was a nice evening, but it would have been nice to stay around for a little while longer. We all scrambled into our cars to go back, and went back. I called a press conference. I said, "It has nothing to do with Vietnam." Well, they came down.

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Oh, I said to her on the phone, by the way, "You know there is going to be a lot of resentment. I don't know whether I can get the whole press together." She said, "Why not?" I said, "Oh, Christ, half of them are out getting laid." And she quoted me as saying that, in her book. When I saw that I got absolutely furious. I said to my wife Christine, "I'm going to sue the bitch." Christine said, "Let me see it." She read it. She said, "Well, you can sue her, but I'd have to testify it sounds just like you." When *McCall's* magazine printed that chapter of the book, they took that part out, so I was unprepared for it when the book came out. Anyway, it embarrassed me with the press, even though I wouldn't be surprised if I had said that. And [it was] probably fairly accurate, probably true.

I'll never forget that midnight press conference. Guys came down in their pajamas, I don't know what they were doing. It was too bad there weren't any photographers there to take their picture, and me reading this announcement. Moyers, somewhere in between, got hold of me and said, "Joe, don't do this for Liz." I said, "Look, it's very awkward. She said the President wanted it." There were a couple of other questions I was able to answer. Anyway, it was quite a night.

G: How did you square this with Moyers? Did he finally acquiesce in your announcement?

L: Well, he was calling from Washington.

G: Why didn't he want you to do it?

L: He felt that this was violating that basic principle of her taking care of the love lives of the daughters. The family was not his bag, and he was right about that. But anyway I went ahead and did it. Next day, I don't know, there were a lot of questions.

I remember another thing that matched that telephone conversation I had with the President in the car, and that is I remember calling the President from a coin booth, one

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of those glass booths on the side of the road, and trying to get some things straight about the previous day's announcement, a little color that I hadn't had before, and having the operator, I remember, cut in and say, "Another ten cents please." These things seem unreal when you look back on them. Anyway, I didn't have a dime and I said, "Can we reverse the charges?" He's the President on the other end of the line!

G: Was he talking when the operator was talking?

L: Yes, sure.

G: What did he say?

L: I don't know. Mrs. Johnson cut in. It was kind of a two-way conversation.

G: That's something.

L: The other thing I remember that was rather embarrassing was, I think it was his birthday. We were down [at the Ranch]. Again I was the acting press secretary. Luci had written a poem about her father to give him for his birthday present. I got a copy of it and I made it available. I assume I had cleared it with the President to make it available to the press. But then the press, they conned me into reading it for the television cameras and halfway through I just broke up. It was a pretty corny poem about her daddy. This got onto the air. It was one of those things I hate even to think about when I look back on it. But I couldn't get through it. Every other line I would just break up, and all of this was being filmed.

G: It's a wonder you survived that one.

L: It is a wonder I survived that or a couple of other things that happened around here. Fortunately I don't think I took myself too seriously in a lot of this, although in some areas I did. I was impressed with the fact that I was representing the President.

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G: I have a note here, "the night the press was kept until midnight."

L: Yes, that's a story I think was recorded in some detail in Liz Carpenter's book. As I recall, not only was it recorded there, but she never got the point, and I rewrote that chapter for that and another chapter. It had to do with the Dominican Republic. Mac Bundy had told me to hold the press there because there would be an important announcement, but I should not disclose to the press in any way what it was.

We used to give them the "lid," as we called it. At five o'clock they kept coming in. That was when they began thinking about telling the wife to put the dinner on, or theater tickets. You couldn't blame them. I told them that there was no lid. In other words, I handled it in a negative way. I didn't say, "Stay on it, we've got something important." I said there was no lid. I decided to handle it that way. Well, they kept coming in and trying to say, "Why isn't there a lid?" I said, "There's no lid. I'm just telling you. When I'm convinced that we're through, I'll give you the lid." That kind of set them off balance, those little nuances that a press secretary has to know how to deal with. Because if you said, "Look, there may be an important announcement coming in," and then there was no announcement, they wanted to know what was this announcement that wasn't made. It's very difficult to handle that, because then their stories tell about this great announcement that wasn't made. This way, all they could write about was the fact that I refused to give them a lid.

Hour went into hour and I held two people there, Connie Gerrard [?], who was my secretary, and Hal Pachios, who was Bill Moyers' bright young man. I kept calling Mac Bundy, "When are you going to have this announcement?" He said, "I have to get it cleared by the President." Oh, by seven, eight o'clock the tempers were rising. Then the

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networks began sending new crews with camera, and all of a sudden this cadre of twenty-five, thirty-five built up to fifty, sixty. You can imagine the theater tickets that had been bought two months in advance [that] were now going down the drain, or they told their wives to go [alone]. Tempers were getting frayed.

There's a man, if you haven't talked to him then you really should get on tape, a fellow named Clint--a little roly-poly guy who was there for several administrations; presidents used to call him by his first name. He was a guy who was paid by the newspapermen. He was referred to as the lighting technician. He violated all the union rules, but he was so well entrenched that everybody would waive it. His basic job was, when we would come into the Cabinet Room, to hold up a huge disk with a light in it to give extra light. But his real service there was that he was sort of an intermediary between us and the press. We would trust him to come in and set up things. Cleve. . . . He was a little roly-poly Irishman, and I kind of loved the guy and so did everybody else. The newspapers would kick in with money--and also, for instance, say there would be a foreign news crew that wanted to film a press conference, and they had to have a platform. He would arrange it for them. With our sort of looking the other way, he would charge them fifty bucks for it. He would get it here, twenty-five bucks here, ten bucks there. He had no salary. He had no official standing, but he was a very useful guy to both the newspapermen and to us.

He was the guy, for instance, this particular night, who would go out and get them all sandwiches. Also he would go down to the area which was barred to the press, where the Macke machines were. We would allow him to go down, but not the press, because we trusted him. He would go down and he would get the hot coffee. Then the Macke



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machine ran out of sandwiches, and he would go out. And he had access; all the Secret Service agents knew him.

G: I wonder if he's still there.

L: Now that you mention it, I haven't seen him for quite a while. But you've got to get in touch with that guy. There's another fellow you've got to get in touch with that I would like to talk to. I can't remember his name, except it was something like Sol Linowitz or Goldberg or something. I'll think of his name. He was the guy who handled the Teleprompters. First he worked for the teleprompter company, and then he went on the payroll. Jack Valenti might remember his name. He was present at a couple of incidents and he had a very fine memory. He was kept on that payroll for two years without doing a lick of work, till finally even he couldn't stand it anymore. You've got to hunt him down somewhere. He may still be in Washington. If you do talk to him I would like permission to either hear him or the tape. Tell him I would like [to]. I used to help him a lot there.

But there were one or two incidents in particular I would like to question him [about] where my memory has faded. One is what happened the time in San Francisco at the UN conference when the teleprompter stuck. I was involved in this, but I've gotten hazy about it. It was a very amusing incident. The other time when he [LBJ] called me and Reedy and him in, and somebody else, and stood us up like infantrymen and chewed us out one after the other, including George Reedy, who he chewed out the most. It was really another humiliating experience for a man of George Reedy's stature. I was the new kid on the block, so it didn't matter, and actually he was very kind to me at the time. But Reedy was the one he just laced into. He was kind to me because LBJ was always kind

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to the newcomers. You really weren't in the club until he chewed you out eight ways from Sunday. Then you knew you belonged to the family.

Incidentally, Dr. [James R.] Schlesinger, who's now Carter's great energy czar, is very much like that. As a matter of fact, he's very much like LBJ. I would have loved to have had the opportunity of bringing the two of them together, but unfortunately that was not to be.

But this guy can give you certain insights.

G: Good. Okay, now--

L: Did I leave something unfinished there?

G: The press was being kept there until midnight.

L: Ah, of course, the press. Well, this went on and on, and finally I said to Mac Bundy, "Look, he was over at the [Mansion]." The President had gone to the Mansion by this time; he was going up to the bedroom. What it was, in looking back, it was some statement about the Dominican Republic and Juan Bosch, that Mac Bundy wanted him to sign. It was not all that newsworthy, but Mac Bundy felt that this would have impact down in the Dominican Republic, and he wanted the widest press coverage on the thing. Finally I issued an ultimatum to Mac Bundy. I said, "We either get a yes or a no in the next five minutes!" He went once more back there, and apparently the President was sulking about something and he just didn't want to sign it. Mac Bundy called me and said, "I give up."

So I said to Pachios, "Go out there. Just take a reading and see are the natives very restless." Pachios went out, came back, he said, "My God, there's blood in their eyes. This statement had better be hot." I said, "Hal, there ain't no statement." We had a

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thing on the telephone you could press which activated a loudspeaker out in the press room in the lobby. You could talk like a loudspeaker. By this time it's about midnight. There was a ground-level window right behind my office then, that probably had not been opened since George Washington's administration. I said, "Look, get some agent in here and with some instrument, we've got to pry this lower window open." We got some kind of thing, the markings may still be on it. We got it up about two feet. We couldn't raise it more than two feet above the sill, which was almost on the level of the ground.

I turned to Connie, I said, "Connie, you get under. Can you make it under there? Go and get a cab." I think she may have had her own car. "Go, and I'll see you tomorrow." I turned to Pachios, I took the phone off the desk and I held it near the window sill. I said, "Okay, Hal, you get out. Soon as I make this announcement, we both run down the path to the Northwest Gate. We get down there, you go right, I'll go left." I pressed the button. I said, "Gentlemen, I have an announcement. There is now a lid," and I hung up, and the two of us ducked under and ran down, and we each went our separate ways.

(Laughter)

G: Oh, I bet they were furious.

L: We turned around once. I permitted myself the liberty of looking over my shoulder. I could see in the light over there, they went right past the police lieutenant, stormed right past him into that place, and talk about security! They could have taken over the White House.

G: What about Bill McGiffin's--

L: Bill McGaffin.

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G: --book on the press?

L: Yes. I'll have to get a copy of that and look up--there were a couple of stories that I gave him. Now he asked me about these things. He heard about them, and I gave it to him in some detail. He told me he was writing a book. Now there's a different approach if somebody is writing a news story, than when somebody is writing a book. If a guy's writing a book it's a year, two years. He asked me about these to clarify it for him, which I did. I gave it to him in considerable detail. The only thing he didn't tell me is that the book was now in galley proof and he inserted it in there. Instead of the book coming out in two years, it was out in four months, with my name in there. I've always been very careful about not having my name [used], which is why a lot of books have come out, including one by Hugh Sidey, that has a lot of my material. But they very kindly kept my name out. Yet now, looking back, I think what the hell. Here I was giving away my life's blood without getting any credit for it. But of course that's part of the game, too.

McGaffin, without asking me, used my name. Not only that, but the book came out--it might have been a magazine piece, with the speed with which it got out. And there were stories--I don't remember the stories--which is now on the record. Get a book and if I look at the book I'll give you the version, to see whether it's my accurate version of it. But they were stories that LBJ would not appreciate, shall I say.

One day I got a call from Larry Levinson, who is now a big executive with Gulf and Western. He was Joe Califano's chief assistant. He called me. He said, "Do you know what Bill McGaffin says in the book, how he's quoting you?" I said, "Yes." He said, "How could you do this to yourself? You're going to get fired!" I said, "I thought the book was coming out two years from now." He said, "You can't talk that way about

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the President of the United States!" And I said, "But two years from now it's a part of history!" But he said, "I just saw the book on the President's desk. I came out of the Oval Office." I said, "Oh, my God!" He said, "Look, tell you what. I'll find some excuse to get in there, and I'll see if I can't smuggle the book out." And that's exactly what he did. He told me, "For the time being I've saved you. I've got the book out. If he doesn't ask for it or miss it, for the time being you're saved, if nobody mentions it to him." And nobody did. (Laughter)

G: That's a great story. Is there anything else you want to put on the tape this afternoon?

L: Let me think.

G: Let's see, we've gone just about three hours.

L: Did I tell you about the first trip out to Honolulu, for the Honolulu Conference?

G: No, I don't think you did. This was in 1965, is that right?

L: No, this was, in my recollection, February of 1966. I was on the press plane. Doug Cater was on the press plane, with instructions. The President had picked him to be his expert on, what do they call it, Vietnamization? There was another name for it. It was one of those things, solve a problem with language. It was not Vietnamization, it was--oh, I'm sure you have heard the word a thousand times, as I have.

G: Pacification?

L: I think it was pacification, yes. Anyway, Doug Cater's job was--he had been to Vietnam; he was sent by LBJ--to explain to the reporters on the press plane all about it so they would be prepared for it, and so they could write stories on it. Except for one thing, that Doug Cater wasn't very clear about what the program was all about. He was worried sick about it. He was on the phone talking to *Air Force One*--Moyers was on *Air Force One*

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then--and he just didn't have his things together and I could see he was worried sick about it. He was asking my advice. I said, "Look, if there's one thing I've learned, Doug, it is that when I don't understand something, I can't explain it to anybody else. You've got a problem, but you're under direct orders from the President." So he said yes. He wanted me to save it until about the last half hour before we came to San Francisco. "Then after that I'm going on *Air Force One*," [he said].

I remember what I did. I said, "Okay, let me get on. I've got some basic information I've got to give them on the cabin loudspeaker about when they can file copy, when we're arriving, and all the rest of that." So I said, "I'm going to drag my feet on this thing." Well, I gave them every detail. I kept them busy. Finally I said, "Now we're going to hear from Doug Cater. He's going to tell you about the pacification program, what was accomplished in Vietnam when he was there." He got on there. He was stumbling along for two minutes. Suddenly the pilot's voice came through. He said, "Everybody back to their seats and fasten your seat belts, please." I said to Doug, "You've done your duty. Back to your seat." I thought that Doug would be everlastingly grateful to me for it, but he wasn't. That was it. He could tell the President yes, he [had] explained it to them. If those dumbbells couldn't understand it, what could we do about it?

G: That's great.

L: These are very, very minor footnotes to history, I'm afraid.

G: I was going to ask you about Moyers' opposition to our involvement in Vietnam.

L: He came out of a cabinet meeting once in which the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs told, as I recall it, that if we escalated the war, there were going to be a minimum of twenty-five

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thousand American casualties in the next year. Moyers came out almost ashen and told me about it. He said, "We cannot do this. There is no excuse for it." If you recall, Moyers was supposed to go to Vietnam. I am convinced to this day that he had plans to go up to Hanoi. You know, pull a Hess, and to single-handedly try to [end the war].

G: What makes you think that?

L: I don't know. This is fantasy on my part, perhaps. But I know he wanted to go to Vietnam, and somehow single-handedly end that war.

G: Did he ever think in terms of a personal mission?

L: He thought of going to Saigon as a personal mission. Then, I forget the reason for it, but he also of course wanted to establish himself in the foreign affairs field. He wanted Mac Bundy's job. I don't know whether I went into this. He once asked me whether I thought he could get away with moving into Bundy's job, when Bundy went with the Ford Foundation. I said, "Bill, not right away." The country was not ready to accept a kid from Marshall, Texas in that particular job, especially one that's sort of been--it had to be somebody from the Eastern Establishment, accepted by Cambridge and all that. I'm convinced to this day that he was the one that decided that Walt Rostow would get that job, who would be minimally accepted. Walt Rostow was not all that highly thought of by that community, as I understand it. I remember Tony Solomon was then assistant secretary of state for economic affairs and sort of came from that background himself, telling me that people up there would kind of laugh at Walt Rostow.

My only experience with Walt Rostow up until that point--of course, he's down there in Texas with you now, isn't he?--was shortly after I came into the White House. My hot-line phone rang on a Saturday night, about eleven o'clock. It was Walt Rostow.

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To me he was [just] a name. He was head of the planning group or something in the State Department. "Mr. Laitin," he said, "I've been ill for a week, and I've been sitting here in bed thinking of things." At that time there was the big border dispute between India and China. He said, "I've figured out a way we can terminate that, relieve the tension there." He began going into great detail about how we could relieve the tension. Finally I said, "Well, Mr. Rostow, I have no way of knowing whether this is a good idea or not. This is not really my field. Why are you calling me?" He said, "Well, I tried to get several other people, but you're the only one I could reach."

(Laughter)

I said, "I'll be glad to call [it to] the attention of the proper people tomorrow." "Well," he said, "I just felt like getting it off my mind anyway. Who else could I call eleven o'clock at night?" I had never met the man.

Now the next time [I dealt with him]--he then took over the Bundy job--that was on the trip to Korea. I'll never forget at that big square in Seoul, there must have been millions of people there.

G: Were you there at that point?

L: Yes, I was.

G: I've heard that that was just a mass of humanity.

L: A mass of humanity. See, that's when I was called back. I told you how I was called by Moyers. No, I did not go into the details about how it was called. But that was the same trip in which I did that advance in Cam Ranh Bay. I don't know whether I've gone into any detail, but if I haven't, I will be glad to do it. I was sent to Korea by Moyers to check on the preparations that had been made for the advance men, all of whom were untried.



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When I came there I found that the first thing that I didn't like was the fact that I felt there was a major mission there that had not really been handled right, and I thought that here was an opportunity to focus the attention of Hanoi on the fact that, while the truce in Korea was not all that great, it was working somehow, this Panmunjom truce, that people were not getting killed. It was an uneasy balance, but maybe something like that could be worked out in Vietnam. I said to the advance people there, "Why don't we have the President visit Panmunjom or Daisy Dewpoint"--or whatever it was--"to focus attention on the fact that there was a truce there, and that while neither side had really given much, that for a couple of years very few people had been killed there. Hanoi might get the idea and say, 'Let's try something like that over here,' or the President could make some allusion to that."

Everybody kind of looked at each other and said, "We ought to bring him together with General Davis." Unbeknownst to me--I came in there maybe three days before the President was expected, or four days. General Ben Davis, the black general, who is the son of the original black general, was the number-two man in command in South Korea. General Davis had been spouting the same thing and somehow nothing seemed to happen. So one of the men there--he was a lieutenant colonel whose name I do not remember--was involved in this with Loyd Hackler, who was the press advance guy. This was his first job; he later wound up as a deputy press secretary and now is active in the Carter campaign. He was Lloyd Bentsen's press secretary--you may know him, as a matter of fact--and a very capable guy. So Hackler and this lieutenant colonel said, "Let's bring Laitin together with Davis."

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It was a Sunday, so they called Davis at home and said, "Look, a man [who] was sent here by Moyers to check on some of the little details, began asking the same questions you have asked about the President going up to Panmunjom. Would you like to talk to him?" Davis says, "Please bring him right over." They drove me up to his house and the General and I sat down. Our ideas were identical. I said, "General, what are the risks involved?" He said, "There are risks. The helicopter could be shot at. But we could increase the number of troops. We could minimize that risk. But I think, after all, the Commander-in-Chief should expect to be exposed to those risks." I would have loved to have seen LBJ's expression if he heard him say that. LBJ didn't think much of exposing himself to those kinds of risks.

At any rate, I worked [out] a whole plan with minimal risks with General Davis. I put this into a confidential cable to Moyers. I think at that time they were in Kuala Lumpur. I said, "I consider this perhaps the most important part of the whole trip, if it works. General Davis concurred." I gave him all the details. We worked out a whole scenario. Back came a message from Moyers to me saying it was a great idea, but he couldn't sell it and he'd explain it to me some other time. Of course LBJ wasn't going to do it, because he'd heard that there were risks involved, I suspect, and wasn't about to do it. Maybe he was right, I don't know. But of course we never did go up there.

Now to get back to this huge mass of humanity. The Secret Service was worried like crazy about it, because whenever the President was going to be somewhere, they always planned in advance an escape route. They liked to have a helicopter not far away when there are big crowds around. They figure out a channel through which they can get the President and whisk him away. If there is any shooting, they never try to get the

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people who are shooting. The idea is to get the President away from danger. In this case, they had built a podium there that was something out of the Mikado. It's hard for me to describe, but there are pictures, plenty of pictures [of it], with heavy velvet carpet. It must have been, I don't know, fifty feet high, dominating this whole square in Seoul, and the mass of humanity. I remember the Secret Service agent, one of the agents charged, got very nervous when he saw the crowd swaying. He said, "You know, that's the worst thing. When a crowd gets in that kind of rhythm, they could knock over a building." The Secret Service was plenty worried.

I was standing on this platform alongside of Walt Rostow. I was a little bit nervous, because the Secret Service agent had gotten me a little nervous. But here was LBJ and the President--I guess it was still [Chung Hee] Park then; yes, of course it was Park--sitting on thrones. Each one had a throne built there. LBJ loved this kind of thing. He couldn't very well do it back here, but he loved it over there. I said to Rostow, "I guess this is what they mean by the teeming Asian masses." He turned on me, he said, "I don't want to hear anybody in the President's staff talking in language like that. These people are individuals. They have a heart and desires just like ours." He started giving me a lecture about this. I looked at him--when I said, "I guess this is what they mean by the teeming Asian masses," you know he starts giving me a lecture about how these people have hearts and dreams and desires, and all that. I felt like a goddamn idiot. But this was Walt Rostow.

Incidentally, this reminds me of another thing. Back in Washington I get a call one day from a man named Dick Morstein [?], Dr. Richard Morstein. He died a year ago. He was a very, very close friend. I knew him in California. He worked for Rand. He

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was a brilliant guy, expert in Southeast Asia, spoke Chinese Mandarin and Vietnamese. He had a marvelous mind and a marvelous sense of humor. He was one of these people that drifts in and out of government in the highest places, knows people on all parties and is an expert, a man who just seems to make things happen behind the scenes. At this particular point he was assigned to some project in the White House.

He came to me one day, and he said, "Listen, I've got a plan for ending the war in Vietnam which I think will work, but I cannot get it past Rostow. I know that you're a good friend of George Reedy's." By this time I was back in the Budget Bureau, by the way--or was I? Yes, I was back in the Budget Bureau. Reedy was no longer press secretary. Moyers was press secretary, maybe it was even Christian, I'm not sure. But Reedy was back on the staff, kind of in [an] out-of-the-way place. He was no longer in the line of fire. But he said, "I would like you to read this." So I read it. I said, "Look, this is good, but I've got no direct access to the President. The best channel I've got right now is George Reedy. But he would have to pass judgment on this plan. It sounds good to me. May I show it to Reedy?" He said, "Of course you may."

So I showed it to Reedy without telling him who it was. Reedy said, "This is a very interesting piece of paper, but it's not presented in the right way for LBJ. I'd have to know more about this. Can you tell me who did it?" Well, here's a guy who was sort of on the White House staff, you know. I went back to him, and I told him George Reedy's reaction. "He wants to know who did it, and he wants to meet with you." So he said, "Fine. It's a risk, because I'm being insubordinate," because technically he was on Rostow's staff. So anyway, I arranged a meeting between the two of them at seven o'clock at night in my office in the EOB. I said, "I'm going to leave you both here. I

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don't want to hear what is being said. You two work it out." So what they did work out is that Reedy would rewrite the thing the way he thought the President would want it. Then he would submit it to the President as his idea, which was okay with Morstein. Morstein said, "The only thing I'm interested in is the result."

Reedy rewrote the thing, showed it to Morstein, Morstein approved of it. Reedy said, "This is the way you've got to present things to LBJ." He was still in a position to get things on the President's desk, which he did. Unfortunately, about four days later Reedy sent to me a xerox copy and said, "You can give this to Morstein if you like." On it was scribbled the initials of Rostow, "WWR, your comments, L." He would sign L, you know, LBJ. Reedy said, "That's the end of that," which it was.

G: What was the plan? Do you recall?

L: At this point I don't, but I'll bet it's--

G: We have it in the file, probably.

L: Oh, I'm sure you have it around.

G: I was going to ask you if you had any other observations about the interaction between LBJ and South Korean President Park.

L: I really didn't see very much of them. I later saw a lot of Park when I went there with Schlesinger in 1975. And then Park, of course, came to the White House. I think secretly LBJ liked that iron hand with which he [ruled].

G: Did you ever hear the story about LBJ asking the President how many people were here at this massive gathering of this mass of humanity? This was all done through an interpreter. The President of Korea, again through an interpreter, sort of apologized for

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only having six million people or two million people. He said, "But that's all the people we've got."

L: I never heard that.

G: Indicating they were all there.

L: Oh, you could just--as far as the eye could see, in these side streets. You don't get that many people together unless they're ordered there.

There was one time in Korea where what I did was--and I may have developed this idea myself. The Secret Service always wanted the photographers in the back of the motorcade. But it doesn't make any sense; the most you could get was the back of the President's head. I insisted that we build a photo car with levels on it, a huge truck, and they would travel in front of the President's car with all the cameras, so you always had the President in front of you. There was one time when that thing was so top heavy, in Korea, the damn thing almost toppled over, the whole kit and caboodle almost toppled over. We had some mighty close shaves.

There was always a funny story there about Pachios, when sometimes the photo car would get too far ahead of the motorcade, which was of no use to the President. Somebody has got to talk to Hal Pachios, and this could trigger [his memory]. He was involved in it and I don't remember. There was a very funny story about how he almost got run over to hold up the motorcade so the President could be photographed.

Speaking of photographs, very few people realize that Okamoto--who photographed, incidentally, mostly in black and white, and he did it very consciously, because he said that the dyes we have now will not last; over a period of years the dyes start fading--he said, "I want people a hundred years from now to see my photographs. I

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photographed them. I'm going to be the Matt Brady of this administration." Even after the first Honolulu conference, Okamoto, as we went to the airport, said, "Joe, the only thing anybody is going to remember from this conference fifty years from now are my photographs." It may well have been the sagest comment made there.

He mostly took black and white. He had a studio over at the--there was a barn over on M Street in Georgetown which had been leased from the bus company. It was always a super secret [place]. They had Secret Service agents around that place. Nobody was allowed to come in. They said there was a highly secret operation. I have reason to believe that there was a small CIA operation over there. But then I also had reason to believe that that wasn't the reason that the CIA operation was [there], but they just had to justify making it a super secret thing, because one night we came back from somewhere at one o'clock, and I was giving Okamoto a ride home. He said, "Look, I got to stop off and leave the film at the laboratory." I said, "Where is the laboratory?" It was in this barn. [We] went in there. It was operated twenty-four hours a day with thirty or forty technicians, serving only Okamoto's photographs. They had equipment in there that I'll bet you Eastman Kodak didn't have yet. Press a button and things would turn around, the photo you wanted would come out, just fantastic machinery, and a place to develop color and all that. It was running twenty-four hours a day turning out only the photographs of the President's personal photographer.

He would take this in. LBJ wanted these photographs. They would blow them up, 16 by 20. Okamoto told me once that in the morning, the first thing when he got up, with his breakfast tray came these large photographs that were taken the previous twenty-four hours for him to look at first thing in the morning. Talk about ego. He would pick

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out the ones that could be made public and the ones that were never to be made public. I've got one picture here which I will show you which he said was not to be made public. I stole it out of Okamoto's--[I have] two pictures which I stole out of Okamoto's office once, the only thing I ever [took]. Okamoto would religiously go along with what the President [said]. I would tell him, "Okamoto, save some of those pictures yourself for history's sake. Don't be a damn fool. Put them away. Stash them or lock them up." I don't know what he did. Most of them are down in Texas now. But I don't know about these ones where the President [said], "Destroy this and destroy that."

The two pictures that I stole the prints out of Okamoto's office, one was a session with--and all the people in it are dead--he was sitting there with Tom Dewey and Everett Dirksen. You look at it and everybody can write his own caption for it. They are all breaking up with laughter, the three of them. The other one was what I consider one of the few pictures I've ever seen of the true LBJ, the man in all his fury, the man who could single-handedly lead generals into battle. He was talking to a group of governors and all of a sudden the hawk-like features came out. It was like no picture you ever saw printed of LBJ. That was the one picture. The other one I think may have gotten out, the one where they were all laughing. It's a marvelous picture. But this one, he said, as I recall, "Destroy the negative of this thing," because I think he himself realized that this was the full fury this man was capable of generating.

This reminds me of another story which I may or may not have told you. It was the same time that I wanted to bring photographers in. Did I ever tell you this story?

G: Out at the Ranch when they were covering the space shot?



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L: No. No, I told you about that, I think. This was the time that he sent a special plane out, presidential plane, to bring the governors in wherever they were meeting in the Midwest. He wanted to talk to all the governors, Republican, Democrats alike. He flew them all into Washington. A lot of this was to get their support for the Vietnam War. He was obsessed with that. He had barred all photographers. I thought it was ridiculous, because the one thing the governors wanted to do was to have pictures of themselves with the President. But he barred them and nobody else had the guts to go right to the President. I got hold of him at the dinner table. He was having dinner. I said, "Mr. President, when you're in there talking with the governors, why don't you let me bring the photographers in there for just two minutes, because they all want to get photographed with you for the hometown paper." Of course I was flattering his ego a little bit. "They want to get photographed with poor little me?" That's the pose he would put on sometimes. Believe me, he could do that little boy thing, and I'll tell you some stories at the hospital at the time about this "poor little me."

Anyway, he said, "I tell you what. Sometimes I think you're working for the photographers, Joe. I'll let you bring them in there if you'll promise me that you'll get them out in two minutes." Well, photographers are a pretty tough bunch. You can't handle them that well. He said, "If you don't get them out there in two minutes I will never let you bring them in or take your word for things like this again." So I called up the head of the White House detail of the Secret Service. I said, "I'm going to bring in a group of photographers into the governors' meeting over in the Mansion. But I want ten of your biggest, toughest agents to go along with me. When I give the signal I want those photographers out of there in nothing flat." Well, the Secret Service never had much love

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for the photographers, and they rather relished this assignment. They said, "Okay," in effect. Jestingly I hope, the guy said, "We won't leave any marks, either."

So I told the photographers, "Come on. I'm going to get you two minutes." I brought them in there, and they began taking pictures. LBJ went right on talking. They got the pictures. Instead of two minutes--you know, you cheat a little bit, just like the time when they took the pictures that ended in the pictures of his scar--[they had] four minutes. Because usually the President wouldn't know two minutes from four minutes. So at the end of four minutes, which was plenty of time, I signaled these agents. Boy, you never saw so many guys move so fast. These guys closed in there. They had the whole thing worked out as a team. They began pushing them. Just as they had them all sort of corralled and ready to shove out the door, the President stopped, he said, "Joe, why don't you let them take a few pictures?" These guys, the Secret Service, looked at me with venom in their eyes. I had humiliated them. One of them, I caught him muttering, "We always knew that Laitin was the guy who was our problem." Anyway, life was a little difficult after that.

You started to ask me a question.

G: I don't know what it was.

L: At the moment I sort of feel all talked out.

There's one thing. Did I ever tell you about how he once asked me how I rated certain correspondents, A, B, or C? Did I ever tell you about that?

G: He loved to grade people, didn't he?

L: Yes. He always thought that Peter Lisagor, of whom I was a great admirer, and I was quite honored to be asked to be one of those to eulogize him at the service at the National

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Cathedral, he put him in category C. I argued with him a little bit. I think if I had any cash reserves with the President it was because occasionally I would argue a little bit with him, which was very hard to find. Lee White was another one who would, but of course Lee White was such a fine technician that he could afford to. He was an electrical engineer, he was a lawyer, he was also a Kennedy man. Later Johnson named him chairman of the Federal Power Commission. He was a very, very bright, solid citizen. Johnson recognized this.

Looking back I'll say this, that Johnson always recognized talent, good men. He had good men around him. You know the time--I may have told you this--when he wanted to cut back on unnecessary [expenditures] when he first came in. Every president, including the present President Carter, wants to cut down on unnecessary agencies and all that. There was one thing he asked. He wanted a recommendation from the Budget Bureau what they could cut out. Somebody said, "The Space Council." "What do they do now?" The answer is, nothing. "They don't do anything at all?" "No." "How many people are there?" "There are thirty people." He said, "They don't do anything. Let's eliminate them. Wait a minute. Do they do any harm?" The budget director said, "No." "Well," he said, "let's not be hasty. They don't do any harm; thirty people work there. I need jobs for slobs and that sounds like a good place to put them." But that showed a certain responsibility. He didn't want the patronage jobs. He wasn't going to put them in a place where [they could do harm]. For instance, there was a guy, the head of the Office of Education, whose name I forget at the moment. He once told me to fire the guy. Told *me* to fire the guy. Who?

G: Francis Keppel?

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L: I think that was the guy, yes. Told me, he said, "Fire the guy." He didn't like something he'd done over some issue down south, the way he'd handled it with the press. Fortunately I didn't take things like that too literally. Jack Valenti would have picked up the phone and fired the guy. Jack used to be terribly literal. So I took a chance and let it go. About ten minutes later he called back, "Did you do anything with that?" "No, I haven't had time. I've been trying to get through to him." "Well," he said, "forget it. John Gardner thinks very highly of this man. If he thinks highly of him, well, maybe I'll see what happens," that sort of thing.

Then there was the time when--I'll say this for [Nicholas] Katzenbach, once when I came into the office to deliver some message--it was in [what] we used to call the Fish Room, now they call it the Roosevelt Room--and he [LBJ] was denouncing Keppel to Katzenbach. To Katzenbach's credit, he said, "Mr. President, may I speak a few words for the defense?" which was a nice way of putting it, and he defended the guy. That shows Katzenbach had some real guts.

G: I think one of the problems with Keppel as far as LBJ was concerned was that he got crosswise with Richard Daley in Chicago and created some political unpleasantness for the President.

L: Oh, that could be. Yes. Yes.

G: Shall we stop at this point and perhaps the next time I come to town do another one?

L: All right. How much tape have you got left on this reel?

G: I've got maybe five minutes.

L: I hate to see tape go to waste that way. Let's see if I can't fill up your five minutes of [tape]. Gee, I didn't realize what time it is.

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G: I think we've got another good three hours to go.

L: Maybe. I wouldn't think so but maybe so. You're in a better position to judge this than I am. Let me just wrap up a few things. I haven't gotten into the time that he was dedicating the home of Herbert Hoover, and he was inviting various people there. He did not invite Goldwater or a couple of other obvious people. Moyers announced who was being invited to this. It was in the White House, but it was some kind of a dedication, presenting of the scroll to be put in the Herbert Hoover Boyhood Home. [He gave instructions] not to invite a guy like Barry Goldwater, with whom he was then feuding over something, and somebody else whose name I don't remember. I'm sure there's enough in the history books, in the file somewhere. They announced to the press. I said to Moyers before it went out, "Listen, the story here is the people you didn't invite, not the people you invited." "Well, that's the way the President wants it." I said, "There's going to be hell to pay."

Well, they put it out. Sure enough, the press noticed this right away. Moyers went into a panic. He said, "What will we do?" I said, "There's only one thing to do. Go back to the President and tell him that that's going to be the whole story, the people he didn't invite." He said, "But how do we then mend this thing to let the press know that we didn't go back?" I said, "If you get the President's okay, then you go out and tell the press. Then we've got to think up at least twenty-five more people to invite, throw their names in and say to the press, 'Look, you stupid fools, that's only part of the list. Here's the rest of it.'" And that's exactly what he did. I'll say one thing for Moyers, when you gave him a good idea he'd follow through on it like that, with the result that the story was.

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. . . There were some guys who were suspicious, but we threw those names in. I don't know where we got them, but that was a very amusing incident.

G: I don't want to tax you too long today, because I do want to get an additional session. One of the things that you might do in the meantime is go over that list of press people, because I'd like your impressions of different reporters who covered the White House.

L: Now or at another time?

G: No, next time. I'm sure that will trigger a lot of other memories.

[End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview III]

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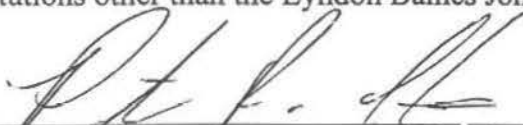

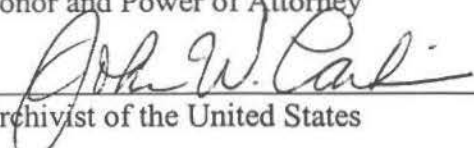
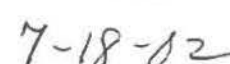
Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of

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:

- (1) The transcripts shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.
- (2) The tape recordings shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcripts.
- (3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcripts and tape recordings.
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