

## INTERVIEW IV

DATE: June 19, 1977

INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH LAITIN

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

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

### Tape 1 of 1

G: Let's start with that anecdote that you were telling earlier [about] LBJ and the press. You mentioned that that was perhaps his most realistic assessment of the press.

L: Okay. Do you want to give the date?

G: No, that's all right. We'll do that later. I'll dub that in later on.

L: There was one occasion down in Texas when there were some reporters who had to see LBJ that morning. They'd been trying a couple of days unsuccessfully to get out to the Ranch. I came down there to relieve--I forget whether it was Moyers or somebody else--but I called the President out at the Ranch and told him that I thought it was very important for these people to come out there. This was shortly after he'd gotten up in the morning. He said, "All right, if you think it's that important tell them to come out here at eleven-thirty, but make it very clear to them that they are not staying for lunch. " As I recall it, there were about five of them. I arranged for them to get out there, by helicopter as a matter of fact, from the airfield, the military field. I expected them back by twelve-thirty and at one o'clock they still didn't come. In those days I used to use the Secret Service out at the Ranch to keep track of his movements. Sometimes they were cagey about it, but mostly they were cooperative. They told me that they were then having lunch with the President. I thought that he'd changed his mind about that. Then I

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waited a couple of hours, and they still hadn't shown up. I called out there, and the Secret Service told me that they had gone over to the place at the lake. It became the LBJ Lake, but it used to be called something else. The Granite Lake?

G: Granite Shoals.

L: Granite Shoals. I called the Secret Service later, and I couldn't reach any of them because they were all out on the lake in his speedboat. Later that afternoon I discovered they were having a big barbecue dinner. There were drinks and all that, and the dinner was still going on at ten o'clock at night. They stayed on and on, and finally the Secret Service called me. It was about twelve to twelve-thirty that they finally were leaving. Somebody who was still at the Ranch was in the kitchen when LBJ came in, and there was Mrs. Johnson. Mrs. Johnson said to LBJ, "Lyndon, I'm proud of you. You were the perfect host to those newspaper people today." And he said, "Yes, but what difference does it make? They'll write what they please anyway." I thought that was probably one of the greatest tributes that he or anybody else had ever paid to the press covering the White House.

Incidentally, I don't know whether I told you this, I was reminded of some other minor incident. Did I ever tell you the story about Cassie Mackin, who since has become quite well known as an NBC news commentator, very prominent in covering the conventions. She replaced Marianne Means on the Hearst headline service. Marianne Means had sort of established that job, and it had to be what was considered a glamorous blonde in the old Hearst tradition. Really, that was an old Hearst tradition. They would have some femme fatale always as a star reporter. Marianne Means was the one in Washington, and she wanted to get off that beat. I forget the background of it. They

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moved Cassie Mackin in. They brought her in, I think, from the Baltimore Hearst paper, and this was her first trip down to Texas.

After church in those days the press would all swarm after them; it was sort of a huge caravan. They'd come to church--this was the one in Fredericksburg--and then the whole caravan would go to wherever he was going, the Ranch. At the last minute he would pass the word down to me by radio, "If they want to come on the Ranch, all right." And he would bring them on the Ranch. Mrs. Johnson would serve coffee, and we'd have an informal press conference.

This particular time we went to his place at the lake. Cassie Mackin had been driven out there by Doug Kiker, who was then with the *New York Herald Tribune*. Since then they've both become commentators on NBC. Kiker was always the nemesis of the President. It was my feeling that if LBJ had run for re-election that eventually Doug Kiker would become his press secretary. There was a lot of hostility there, but they were both cut from the same mold of cloth. Kiker in those days was quite a philanderer. He had selected out this new femme fatale and had offered to drive her down. She was completely green.

The President pulled me aside and said, "Who's that new girl?" I said, "She's replacing Marianne Means." "Oh," he said, "Listen, see if she'll go out with me on the speedboat, if she'd like to go out there." This was still before noon on Sunday. I said, "Well, there's a little problem. She was driven out by Doug Kiker." "See what you can do to cut him out. I don't want him. Make it plain I'll see to it she gets back to Austin." I said, "Fine, Mr. President," I would see what I could do." It was going to be a rather delicate operation, so I pulled Doug Kiker over to the side and I said, "Look, Doug, I'll

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lay it right on the line. The President wants to take Cassie Mackin out on the speedboat, and he doesn't want you. Now are you going to give me a hard time or are you going to be a gentleman about this?" He said, "Okay, I understand. Okay, you owe me one though." I said, "Okay."

So I went over to Cassie Mackin and said, "Cassie, look, the President wants to take you out on the speedboat when everybody's left." She said, "Oh, I can't. I was driven out here by Doug Kiker. I've got to go back--" I said, "I'm taking care of Doug Kiker, don't worry about it. I'll see to it that you get back." "No," she said, "I just can't go." I said, "Why not?" "Well, I haven't been to mass yet." I was put in the position of having to go to the President and say Doug acted like a perfect gentleman and all that, but she wouldn't go out with the President of the United States on his speedboat because she hadn't been to mass yet on Sunday morning. I thought to myself, "Either this girl is going to go very far or she ain't going nowhere." I couldn't make up my mind. Anyway, she stuck by her guns, and I must say that LBJ was absolutely bewildered by that.

G: Is that right?

L: Absolutely bewildered. A couple of weeks later he finally did get her to go out on the speedboat. I was wondering if he would drop her as a stupid broad or whether this would whet his appetite. Apparently it whetted his appetite.

G: That's fascinating.

Also, the administration seemed to like Marianne Means and her coverage of the White House. I'm wondering if he made any effort to get her syndicated?

L: He may have. He used to try to do that with people he liked. He tried to give the career of Max Freedman, the *Manchester Guardian* correspondent, [a boost]. He even went to

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his home once. He had about twenty newspapermen at dinner, and LBJ went to this man's home in order to boost his career. I recall that very distinctly.

G: Is that right?

L: Yes, during the Moyer's period I think you'll find that crops up. He was the Washington correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*, whose career was sagging, apparently.

G: But you don't remember anything specific?

L: I don't remember anything specific. I do know that Marianne Means used to get invited up to Camp David on weekends. I assume you know what all the gossip was, but all I know is what I used to hear in terms of gossip. She would come to me at times with information saying, "The President said that I could see you on this story and that you could give me all the facts." Which used to put you right in a tough spot because she was pretty much capitalizing on whatever relationship she had with the President. And there was no question he would have said that.

Once, when she really bore down on me to provide all the details for the President's economy program in government to cut back expenses, I knew the stuff she was looking for, and I gave her the old statistics straight from the book. But there was one thing that I gave her which she always appreciated. It was sort of a way of getting back, too, because the President had stolen my secretary that I had and moved her over to his staff. I said to Marianne Means, "As a matter of fact, the President takes his economy program so seriously that he's now got a new secretary called Thrift." That was Virginia Thrift. I don't know whether her name has ever cropped up.

G: Ginny Thrift, sure.

L: Ginny Thrift. She made that the capstone of her article.

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Did I tell you about Ginny Thrift when she met a one-star air force officer and he asked her to marry him? Ginny Thrift, who was almost a caricature of a southern belle, went into the President--he was working on some papers--and she said, "Mr. President, I just wanted to tell you I'll be leaving next week. I'm getting married." Without even looking up from his papers he said, "If it doesn't work out come back."

G: Isn't that something?

L: Did you ever hear that?

G: That's great.

I want to mention a quote that I found on the Washington press and see if you agree with it. "The only newspapermen practically all of them admire are Walter Lippmann and Scotty Reston. As long as those two are for Lyndon Johnson he will, on the whole, get a good press from the rest of them."

L: I never heard him say that, but judging by the amount of attention he would pay to both men I would say there is some evidence to support that.

G: How influential were those two?

L: You mean how influential were they with him or with the public?

G: No, with the press, the Washington press.

L: The Washington press. There was a considerable amount of influence, I would say.

They were the two elder statesmen in Washington. For instance, he would, especially during the first year or so of his administration, drive to Walter Lippmann's home to chat with him.

G: Is that right?

L: Yes.

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G: I get the impression that when they soured on Vietnam that upset him more than when a lot of other people did. As I recall it bothered him quite a bit, yes. I think that when you look back on Vietnam it was the great tragedy of his administration. He just got himself mired down there. But in some ways he probably had nobody but himself to blame, too.

Now, I see a memo here. It's a memo from Bill Moyers to Barbara Furlow, who died a couple of years ago, on *U.S. News and World Report*, objecting to a [Washington] "Whispers" item. It is about how President Johnson would get a list of proposed news releases by government departments, then on Thursday "checks off those that should be releases coming from the White House." Moyers says it's "spurious and ridiculous," and "gossip like this only demeans the Office of the President," and "I'm surprised you would run it without an effort to verify it." Then at the bottom it says, "For the President's night reading from Bill Moyers." In other words, he was getting some brownie points and the President had raised hell about this. It was rather interesting because LBJ used to read "Whispers", which gave it more impact than it deserved probably. But Moyers himself used to feed stuff in there to maneuver his own position within the White House. As far as those press releases are concerned, I don't think he was ever quite as crass as all that.

But I'm telling you this, that we used to save up press releases from all of the agencies and unload them, especially down in Texas, to make it look like a working vacation down there. There was one time, I think, in a three-day period when he put out something like one hundred and fifty press releases. It reached the point where, I know when I was conducting the briefing, we would hand out something like forty press releases, which would just inundate them, including a press release from the National Park Service about some new species of birds that were seen in some National Park. And

the ribbing there. If you get transcripts of some of those briefings down there, you had to stand up there with a straight fact and take it. But it was ludicrous, and yet it was all designed to swamp the reporters, to keep them busy. Actually, they would send out one sentence on the press release, or they would put out a whole story making fun of the number of press releases. Although, looking back on it now, I think they were charitable to us the way they handled some of that.

G: I gather though that the White House did exactly what she says they did, in terms of soliciting from the agencies.

L: We did. But I don't think Johnson himself would ever check them off. Maybe he did. I didn't know about it. But we would encourage people to send them in, especially when we knew we were going down to Texas. It was his theory that he would sort of hide behind this barrage of press releases to show that he really wasn't taking a vacation. We would almost manufacture news to put out down there. He was obsessed with the idea that people would think he was relaxing. Incidentally, [this is] in contrast to Carter now, who tells his staff they've got to see their families; of course, then he loads them up with work so it becomes impossible. But at least Jimmy Carter is relaxed about it. But then Jimmy Carter goes down to Plains and drives the reporters nuts because he really does make news.

Now there is one memo I see dated April 11, 1966, from me to the President, where I refer to a clipping--it was actually a two column picture taken by United Press. One of them appeared in the *Washington Star*, and one was in the *San Antonio Light*. I was calling the President's attention to how it had been tampered with. It was a picture of Lynda with George Hamilton, who was courting her at the time. I very carefully checked



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the two pictures and had one of the White House photographers check it. It was indeed the same picture, but in the *San Antonio Light* they had cut out the distance between them as they were walking and made it look as though he was right up close to her with his arm around her. At that time he was very sensitive about his daughter going around with George Hamilton, who he always referred to as Charlie for some reason or other. But I was calling his attention to that. I guess this was sort of pandering to the President a little bit because I knew how much he hated the press and didn't like George Hamilton. But those are the things that sometimes you did.

Now I see another memo from me to him which I think was rather courageous, either that or stupid of me at the time. This was dated May 25, 1966. He was always anxious to show statistics which would demonstrate that he was holding more press conferences than his predecessor, Jack Kennedy. We put out a new tabulation which apparently came under my direction. It turned out that in a comparable period of time, indeed, Kennedy had held more press conferences than he had, and he was demanding an explanation. And this was the explanation. I think if you've heard of that memo, you can see there's no point in my going over it. But looking at it now, as I say, it was very courageous of me to do this. I was either a man of great courage or great stupidity. I don't know which now that I look back on it. Because he could not have liked this memorandum, which pointed out that the original tabulation which made it look as though he was holding vastly more press conferences than Kennedy was including little quickie[s]; every time a reporter would stop him in the hallway and ask him a question that was counted as a press conference. I thought that was outrageous. I suspect that some of the people doing this tabulation were people like Jack Valenti, who would have

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no scruples about something like this. Particularly with regard to statistics it seems. I notice here another memo where it says the President removes the following people from the guest list for the Presidential Scholar ceremony. Among the people he removed was Peter Lisagor. He never was that completely sold on Peter Lisagor, who died several months ago. As one of the top newspapermen, he once told me he'd rate him C, you know, in a listing of A, B, C. I remonstrated with him, but not very strongly. But I did tell him that I thought Peter was among the best in town. But here he is crossing him off his invitation list.

Now this was the invitation list for the Presidential Scholars which reminds me of something else. At this ceremony he was supposed to then hand out the medals to, I don't know, eighty of these people. We had gone to a great deal of trouble to set it up so each one would be photographed with the President, take it back to his home town and all that, get the angle right. After he made his few remarks, he said thank you and got off the platform in the East Room and walked away, walked out. Everybody was stunned, and the kids, you know, this was going to be the highlight for them.

Well, I ran after him. Mrs. Johnson ran after him. Bess Abell ran after him. We cornered him in one of the rooms, the Red Room [or one of those]. We said, "Mr. President, you are supposed to give out the medals to these people." He said, "Why didn't somebody tell me? I feel like a damn fool going back in there. I'm not going back in there." All of us, including Mrs. Johnson, remonstrated with him. Of course, she took the lead. She said, "You know we all work so hard. We're all so overtired. We make mistakes like this." I must say she did a beautiful job at gently twisting his arm. Then I believe I came up with an idea. He said, "How am I going to go back there?" I said,

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"Mr. President, I'll go back and say you were called out for an urgent call to the Secretary of State and that you'll be right back." He said, "Okay. Go ahead and do it." So that's how we eased him back, and then he handed out the medals. Not a very important footnote to history.

G: Another one there that was taken off the list was Art Buchwald.

L: I noticed that. Well, Art Buchwald, Russ Baker, he doesn't understand their kind of humor, for one thing. Now Bob Donovan surprises me. Walter Lippmann, James Reston [are] taken off. Now look at the people he wanted put on. Who knows? Ray Sherer, Harry Reasoner, William White, Russ Wiggins, Kay Graham--who knows what the reason for it is?

One of the things, incidentally, I just thought of, with his breakfast in the morning there was a long period of time [during which] the first thing that was brought in to him was the batch of Okamoto's photographs taken the day before. These were the 16-by-20 enlargements. They had been working on them all night at that studio. We had twenty people working there at night, developing and enlarging these pictures on M Street in that abandoned car barn, kept under very rigid security, by the way. That was the first thing in the morning, with his breakfast on the tray, not the morning papers. He would go through them saying, "See if you can put this one out. Don't put this one out. Autograph this one," and so forth. That was the first order of business with him in the morning.

Now there was another memo here. This is a letter from Merriman Smith to Bill Moyers dated October 21, 1965. He says, "Someone's ineptitude, ignorance or arrogance--whichever is larger—" and so forth, "the Secret Service and the White House police openly disregarded your plans for admitting the pool car into the White House

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grounds when the President returned home. No matter how Joe Laitin pleaded with the police at the Southwest Gate, he was turned down flat." I remember that with remarkable clarity because I still feel that was probably the signal to me of the beginning of the end of my career there, although it took a long, long time for the career to be terminated.

But I was in charge of that motorcade, and at that time, as I think I may have mentioned to you, my Secret Service code name was Weatherman, which since then has taken on a little different meaning in the terrorist decade which followed. Everybody had a code name; mine was Weatherman. But I was in this car. What Smitty says here about secretaries and the empty car, that's all very true. That red car, I remember that very well, too. We came to the gate, and they cut us off. I called on my radio in to Lem Johns, who was head of the White House detail--he's now over there with Califano at HEW--and I said, "Lem, this is Weatherman. Will you please tell the police at the gate to let us in? I'm with the pool." Back came a voice, "Weatherman, there's no such code word.

That was when, indeed, I found out that I had been removed from that select list of those who had code names. You see, not everybody did. That had been done, I later learned, on the specific instructions of the President. I think I have already recounted on another tape my experiences at the hospital with him. I think probably he decided then that he really didn't want me around very much longer, although it took a long time. It took a year almost. But I remember that was done by the President himself. Why he did it, I don't know. Maybe he was just trying to humiliate me in front of the newspapermen.

G: So, what happened after that?

L: I never had a code name again.

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G: But here you were still trying to get the reporters in. When they told you you didn't have a code name, did you--?

L: They just didn't know me. We just had to go around the other way and go in through the Northwest Gate. We were just cut off, boom.

G: Did the press ever get back in, or what?

L: We got back in to the press room, but never to the south entrance, you see.

G: How do you know that it was LBJ himself and not someone else?

L: Well, it would not have been Moyers. It could have been Watson, but it would have been done only on the instructions of the President. Lem Johns on his own would never have done anything like that.

G: But you think it was aimed at you rather than at the press?

L: Yes. Yes.

G: You never talked to Lem about that afterward?

L: Oh, he would never tell me. Let's see, I haven't seen this memo.

See, there were many things that would happen there which were very strange indeed. For instance, whenever he would take off in the helicopter for Camp David, somebody had started the procedure of letting the correspondents--usually it was on a Saturday--into the Cabinet Room where you could see through the bushes in the Rose Garden the helicopter take off. Nobody ever said it, but obviously all they were there for [was] if the helicopter crashed they could be an eyewitness to the death of the President. But then every once in a while LBJ would say, "Nobody watches it." So they would quickly, people like Frank Cormier, run all the way around the White House to the south end, and with binoculars, they would all have a pair of binoculars, they would look at it,

watch it. What it was, I discovered later, the President didn't want them to see who he was taking with him to Camp David, and when they would go down there they thought they were beating the system, you see, by watching with binoculars. But the fact is that the passengers were getting on from the other side of the helicopter, and they couldn't see who was getting in.

G: Isn't that amazing?

L: Now whether he didn't want them to know whether he was taking politicians up there, or whether there was any hanky-panky I'm not in any position to know. I can only speculate. But the fact is he did not want them to know who was going up with him.

G: As I say, in going through these files I get two different viewpoints: one, that the President was too accessible to the press; and another one, that he was not accessible enough. How do you feel about that?

L: There was one memo here, I think it was Tom Johnson's, where if they made the President too accessible the stories were that he was trying to use the press to spread the propaganda. If he limited the number, then he was becoming inaccessible and didn't want to communicate with the public. I have since discovered this is a standard operating procedure on the part of the press. It's their weapon. I mean, there's no rationale behind it. That's the way they react. It's a little immature, I think, but it's standard, no matter who the president is.

Another thing that is standard with the press around the White House is once you do something, then they want to do it again. You say, "No," and they say, "It's a tradition now to do it." So with the press, you do it once, it becomes a tradition. Now the press has one advantage around the White House. They have the continuity. With a lot of

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things they tell Jody Powell now, "It's always been done this way." He doesn't know. He does call me once in a while and says, "Is this the way they used to do it?" They push. They keep pushing and pushing, getting a little more here and a little more there. I'm not saying it's necessarily bad, but that's the way the press manages the news, you might say. Although they're always accusing the White House of doing it.

I find that in response to your earlier question about whether he held too many or not enough, I just think the White House, any White House, ought to be a little more relaxed about it. You can't let the press run your whole system for you. It's almost like in my own house. If I let my thirteen-year-old Peter run the house, he'd be glad to take it over. That's the way the press is about the White House. But on the other hand, if you let some idiots around the White House run it, it's almost as bad. I don't know where the--

G: My reading of this, plus what you've told me in previous conversations, is that he may have been too accessible on an individual basis, calling one reporter at a time in and talking to him for an hour or such, but he perhaps did not give enough formal press conferences. What do you think about that?

L: I think that depends on what you call enough. One of the problems with press conferences is that sometimes you make news when there isn't any, you make headlines when really they're manufactured headlines. Sometimes I think this is bad for the country and bad for foreign relations. It misleads people. The press is just as guilty, if not more guilty, as the President or the hierarchy in the White House. I think that his record of press conferences stands up pretty well with other presidents and is better than most. As far as his seeing reporters individually, I think perhaps at times he overdid it. There was a rather cute phrase that Peter Lisagor used once when he was summoned to see the

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President alone so many times for some reason or other. You know, I told you in the earlier conversation where he thought that Peter Lisagor belonged in category C, rating them among correspondents. But once I ran into Peter and I knew he had been summoned to the Oval Office or that little think tank next to it, and I said, "Peter, I hear you're really in with the President." He said, "Joe, for the first time in my life I think I can say I'm over sourced." That's over s-o-u-r-c-e-d.

G: Another theme that seems to run through these files is that there was a view that too much emphasis was being placed on the Washington-New York press and not enough on the press beyond the Atlantic coast.

L: This is absolutely true. If a story didn't appear in the *Washington Star* or the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*, or in those days the *New York Herald Tribune*, the story hadn't been published with LBJ. I should add one other paper, the *Austin-Statesman*, or, you know, the *Dallas News* or the *Dallas Times-Herald*. The *Atlanta Constitution*, which today is a big paper in terms of Washington, I don't think he had ever heard of it. The *Los Angeles Times*, which now gets most of the leaks from the Carter Administration, really didn't rate all that much, and yet they gave good coverage. They had fine correspondents here. Incidentally, Lyndon Johnson is not the only one who used to feel that way. I think that that is a tendency here in Washington, that if it isn't on the networks or on the three big papers, the *New York Times* or--I'd throw the *Wall Street Journal* into that, too--that is just hasn't appeared anywhere. I think that is quite true, and it's unfortunate. If a reporter, a columnist, did not have an outlet in any of those papers, he just didn't exist.

G: Yes.



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L: That was the unfortunate, the sad part of Peter Lisagor, who never had a regular Washington outlet. The one thing that saved him was that he was a regular member of the panel of "Meet the Press," and also of course the Agronsky show. Now there was the Agronsky show, which for all intents and purposes was really a local show; certainly his Channel 9 show was, and then on public television, while it was syndicated, they sort of used to bicycle it around the country. But it was only the Washington outlet that meant anything.

There was another program which terminated about six or seven months ago, that Maury Povich show, that noon show on Channel 5. That was strictly a local Washington show, and at high noon, but he always would have guests. But because it was here in Washington, and because the congressman would sometimes watch it, it's importance was far beyond what it should have been--only because of the fact that it was here in Washington and that you could never tell what influential person would turn on the television set at noon and watch his guest interviews.

G: It's odd, because it seems to me that in his pre-presidential years he used to pay far more attention to the smaller, small town newspapers than he did later.

L: In Texas.

G: But rather than just paying attention, say, to the big urban newspapers or the localized newspapers, that he would really get a good cross section, and here it seems that his focus was on the Washington and New York papers.

L: Well, I think Kennedy was probably very much like that, too. Although Bill Kent of the *Chicago Sun Times* was one of his favorites, but he tended to favor the big urban papers. I forget who it was who wrote an article about his programs for the *New Republic*. I can't

remember who it was, but somebody else could tell you who it was. At any rate, he called him in and said, "That was a great article you wrote. Now why don't you try to get it published somewhere where somebody will read it."

G: That is something.

L: There was a phone call. Charlie Bartlett. Have you ever talked to Charlie Bartlett? You ought to really talk to him.

G: He should be on the list. He may have been seen.

L: Because Charlie Bartlett was Jack Kennedy's best friend. He'd be very good in comparing some of these things. He's a very good man, Charlie Bartlett.

G: You mentioned the *Wall Street Journal* earlier. Lyndon Johnson seems to have regarded that as very anti-LBJ. Is that the case?

L: I don't know of anything that would dispute that, and I know a couple of hostile stories that they wrote during my period. So there was some validity to his feeling.

I remember one story, which was the first budget that came out when I was here. The lead on the story said that a high Budget Bureau official said that President Johnson's 1964 budget wouldn't pass the frauds division of the Securities [and] Exchange Commission. Talk about a hostile lead. Well, first of all, at that time we couldn't figure out who the Budget Bureau official was. It couldn't have been somebody who was a budget expert because he wouldn't think in those terms, on account of the President's budget is not really an economic document, it's a social document, you see. Certainly no Budget Bureau official would have been stupid enough to say that to the *Wall Street Journal*. Later on we found out that it was the head of the international division, who had been one of the big planners of the Bay of Pigs and had been dumped into the Budget

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Bureau. It was a face-saving job, you know. It was Al Otten who wrote the story, and nobody would answer his phone calls, he told me, except me for a whole year.

G: Really?

L: Yes. Incidentally, about a year later he said he had to get back into the good graces of the Budget Bureau, and he wrote a puff piece about the Budget Bureau. He called me and said, "What did you think of that piece I did?" And I said, "It's fine except it would never get past the frauds division of the American Society of Newspaper Editors." (Laughter)

G: On the other hand, I get the impression that Jack Anderson was very favorable to LBJ and that he would indicate almost a *quid pro quo* arrangement, that if given an interview a favorable story would result.

L: That was going on, yes. That was going on. I don't know the details of that, but I knew there was a lot of stuff flowing over to Jack Anderson. For instance, I remember once when I was on partial detail at the Selective Service Commission, of which Burke Marshall was the chairman, Burke Marshall called me and said, "Did you read Jack Anderson this morning?" I said, "Yes." He said, "That was a highly confidential memo for the President, and the whole thing got leaked to Jack Anderson. The President just called me from Texas and is raising hell and said to find out who leaked that memo and to let him know. Now I'm passing this on to you. You better find out who leaked that memo."

So first I tracked the memo. The confidential memo made its way to the President via Joe Califano, who was up here in the West Wing. From him it went down to Jim Jones, who was the special assistant down at the Ranch. So I called down there and I asked Marie Fehmer, who was the secretary on duty there, "Listen, in the past couple of

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days has there been a call put through to Jack Anderson?" I forget whether it was Jack Anderson or Drew Pearson in those days. They were working together, you know. She said yes. I said, "Did the President talk to him?" She said, "No, Jim Jones did." I said, "Thank you very much," and I called Burke Marshall back and I said, "Listen, you better drop the witch hunt." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, the leak came from LBJ." He said, "You don't mean that seriously." I said, "Yes," and I told him the facts. I said, "This is typical of him. He leaked this thing to Pearson"--or Anderson--"and he's calling you this way to cover his front by putting you off the scent. I have enough evidence to support it. He gave the memo to Drew Pearson." But it was interesting. Here was the President of the United States who felt he had to cover himself.

G: Isn't that something.

Johnson once expressed the belief, and this was early on in 1964, or in August, 1964, that the Washington press was out to get him because he was a southerner.

L: That was a theme running all through LBJ. He felt they looked at him as the crude southerner--you know, the eastern establishment, he was not a member of it and all that. I mean, yes, there was that feeling. But you know, there are so many better sources for that than I, namely, George Reedy for one. He would be the best source for something like that. Or Bill--did somebody tell me Bill Moyers wasn't cooperating with you on this oral history?

G: What about Dan Rather? Do you think that Rather was out to get him?

L: But Rather was a fellow Texan. I never had the feeling that--

G: How about CBS in general?

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- L: He wooed CBS like crazy. As a matter of fact he wooed all the networks, and that was one of the reasons he hired Bob Fleming. He took the weakest of the three bureau chiefs, three networks. There was Bill Small, who has since become a top executive at CBS. There's Bill--what's his name? He runs "Meet the Press" now. He replaced Larry Spivak.
- G: We'll add it later.
- L: And then there was Bob Fleming. He was always after Reedy and later Moyers to get some TV news expert. He sensed how important TV was. But he thought that getting somebody who was an expert would somehow enhance his image on television. Anyway, they finally got Bob Fleming. I mean this sounds rather cruel, but I think it's probably accurate that ABC was trying to unload Bob Fleming, and they unloaded him on the White House.
- G: What about Bob Kintner? What did he do in this?
- L: Bob Kintner came in later. He'd been president of, first, NBC and then ABC. He came in there, this was during the Moyers period, moved in like a Sherman tank and began building up this empire and spreading the word that he was closest to the President. As a matter of fact, the President probably encouraged that to put Moyers in his place. Moyers once told me to spread the word that it was the one who could get in to see the President any time he wanted to who was really running things, and only Moyers could do that, see. He did have Moyers a little bit worried there for a while. But I wasn't worried because I knew that Kintner was heading for a fall, that anybody who is building up that kind of an empire would also become a threat to the President, and that's exactly what happened. He just cut the feet out from under Kintner, and that was the end of him.
- G: Do you think it was the result of--

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L: When that happened, by the way, I was back at the Budget Bureau, so I was getting a little more detached view of it.

G: But was there a particular incident where something had gone badly and he took the blame?

L: I don't recall any.

G: It was just gradual?

L: Yes. There was a group pulled together. You know LBJ, and I remember Reedy telling me this, was youth happy. He realized the young were coming into the voting stage, and if he could capture the youth he would have it made. So he organized a youth group, or had somebody else organize the youth group in the White House. He wanted them to have it fully structured, and they wanted to elect a leader. He let it be known who his candidate was. Now his candidate was a fellow that I had perhaps been a little instrumental in getting over there. He's a man I knew in the Budget Bureau. He still today remains one of the brightest people I've ever known. His name is Edward Hamilton.

I remember once in the White House Mess telling Mac Bundy that there was one man that ought to be brought over to the White House. I described him, so finally Bundy said, "Who is this genius?" I said, "Ed Hamilton." He said, "You know, it's an interesting coincidence that you're bringing this up and all that, because I've been negotiating for about two months to bring him over here. This really confirms what I feel about him, and I'm going to lose no time in bringing him over." Which he did. This man became a favorite. He was only twenty-six years old or something like that. He brought him over. He was a brilliant man, whose personal life was a mess by the way. I think

since he's been married three or four times, a child with each one. But he's still, as I say, one of those brilliant guys who could write like a dream, and he had a mind with a steel-cutting edge.

Anyway, that was LBJ's candidate. But everybody ganged up on LBJ, and they elected somebody else as head of the group. At the moment I can't remember who it is, but I can find it. When you go over the notes if you want to find out I know enough people involved, and I can get the name of the man that they voted, which was quite a disappointment with LBJ. This group kind of died on the vine as a result.

G: Speaking of power struggles, before we turned on the tape you outlined what happened when Walter Jenkins left, in terms of aides struggling for position. I wish you'd do that again, because it gives us a better perspective.

L: Now this is my observation. See, I was over at the Budget Bureau then; when I came onto the scene in the White House Jenkins was, of course, already gone. But I could see the pieces and perhaps had a little better view of it, as I look back, putting the past together with the future. But when Jenkins was there he was almost like a balancing wheel, or a man who held such undisputed position that the echelon under him all did their jobs and never challenged him. They knew that everything had to go through him. Or maybe it was Jenkins's genius. Whatever it was, he kept things very much under control, and there was relative peace among the palace guard.

When Jenkins left, as a result of that tragic incident, everybody began jockeying for position. When I say everybody, I mean the old palace guard consisted then roughly of Moyers, Reedy, Valenti and Busby. Interestingly enough, all of them with a writing or journalistic background. I hadn't realized that before. Liz Carpenter I think you could

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also throw in there as the fifth person, but because she was a woman she was not really a serious contender; although she built up that job with Mrs. Johnson into a powerful job, and it was kind of always a little threat to all of them there. But this is something also that I believe was encouraged by LBJ. Now this doesn't include the people who came in from the outside who were always short-lived--the Eric Goldmans, there was that little kid--what was his name? He was about five foot two.

G: Dick Nelson?

L: Dick Nelson, yes. You really know these people, don't you? Incidentally, his code name, I think, was Wildcat. He had the radio put in his own car, the two-way radio, White House radio, and he would take out gals. He would always pick up this to impress them and say, "Wildcat to Crown. Any messages for me?" This made quite an impression on the impressionable young women. Of course, the whole circuit would pick this up. One day Mac Kilduff, who was on the same circuit driving in a White House car--and he couldn't stand this guy Dick Nelson--heard this come through the circuit. He picked it up in the White House car, and he said, "This is Crown to Wildcat. Your code name has been changed to Pussycat." I think that was the last time he did that.

Anyway, as I say, it doesn't apply to the outsiders who would come in, who would become more and more important and then somehow would never really count in the power struggle. I think Kintner came closer than anybody else for an outsider. I should have had Marvin Watson in that, of course.

G: He came later, though.

L: That's right, he did come later.

G: Reedy was the first to go, you indicated.



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L: Reedy was the first to go. He'd always had a stormy relationship with the President. The President used to constantly humiliate him, ground him down to a fine powder. There was one incident when I wasn't there in Texas, I wasn't on board yet, where Reedy was so infuriated he got in his car and he was going to just drive back to Washington and quit, and the President had him intercepted by the Secret Service and bodily brought back.

G: Is that right?

L: Yes. At any rate, there was this increasing problem with his feet. What is it called? The toes hangnail?

G Hammertoes.

L: Hammertoes. It was getting more and more difficult, but that coincided with his deteriorating situation in the pressroom. He had the worst press--I'm talking about Reedy now--the worst press. Every day you'd pick up the papers, and on Sunday in the Op-Ed pages the columnists were tearing Reedy apart mercilessly. I thought then and I think now how stupid the press is in not knowing that he was doing these things on the order of the President. Reedy would step between the press's arrows and the President, take it himself. He was that loyal. Moyers didn't, but Reedy did. The press would write this nonsense about how Reedy was the big villain then. It made marvelous copy. So whenever press secretaries feel the press is cruel to them, I like to remind them of what they did to Reedy. I don't think any press secretary has ever taken the beating, including Ron Ziegler, that Reedy took, and Reedy was a good man, not a good press secretary but a good man. This kept deteriorating his position. The more his position was deteriorating, the more it narrowed down to Busby and Moyers. Busby was kind of a little more timid than Moyers.

I remember once I was left alone there on a Saturday, and I was going to hold the briefing. Did I tell you about that?

G: This was the one where you both went into the President?

L: Okay, I told you about that. You see, Busby was just devastated after this. This was the President pushing him into the job, and Busby let himself be pushed out of it. And the President was observing all of this. This perhaps provides an interesting insight into the President. I never would have gotten away with that with Moyers. Anyway, a week before Reedy left he told me that Moyers had been tapped and that I'd better start looking for another job because Moyers would never hold on to anybody that Reedy had brought in because of their personal relationship, which was not very good. So I let it be known around that, I wanted to get out of the place. I had my desk cleaned out.

Then Moyers was announced, and the next day he was holding his first press briefing. You know, Moyers is a pretty dynamic guy, there's no question about it, and would create excitement around him. He brought over from the EOB a very nice young guy, Harold Pachios from Maine, who practically went through law school. But he had him stashed away in the EOB--he was a very nice guy--and he brought him out into the light. I'd never met him before, and yet there he was working for Moyers, probably doing a certain amount of work getting him memos. But he had him so carefully stashed away I never even knew he existed till he brought him out, and in front of me he said, "Hal, I'm going to announce you as my deputy. You worked on the Portland--what newspaper, is that up in Maine?" He told him what it was. "Now how long did you work there?" Pachios said, "Three months," and Moyer's jaw almost dropped. He said, "How long?"

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He said, "Three months." Then he said to him, "I never told you I was really a newspaperman, Bill."

That was when Moyers turned to me and said, "Joe, you're going to stay on. If you don't stay on, I'm going to go to the President and have him personally order you to stay here. I need you." That's how quick he was. You realize he was in a spot, you see. That was the first I knew I was going to stay on. I discovered later that Busby had told him when the decision had been made that Moyers was the man, "Look, Bill, with your background you'll never be able to do that job unless you hold on to Laitin, who really has a background." Now this I didn't know until months and months later. I found out from Moyers himself. That was apparently the real reason, plus the fact that he discovered that his Hal Pachios had a career of three months as a newspaperman.

I discovered in the ensuing months I played an entirely different role with Moyers. I became a much more important man in the White House under Moyers than I ever did under Reedy. One of the reasons for this, of course, is that Moyers was more important in the job than Reedy was in terms of his ability, and I was the number two man there. But my role was different, in that with Reedy it was a matter of prodding and with Moyers it was a matter of holding him back, keeping him from making mistakes. I constantly had to suggest reining him in, and much to Moyers' credit he listened to me. He never rewarded me, but he listened to me.

G: What was Valenti's role in this? Did he also want to become press secretary?

L: Yes. Then Busby left a couple of weeks later. I told you that once there was an item in the "Whispers" of the *U.S. News and World Report* that the President was planning to make Busby the press secretary in another week or two. This was devastating to Busby

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because it looked as though he'd planted it, you see. In actual fact, it was Moyers who planted it just to embarrass Busby. That's the way that place used to work. Because he knew that the President used to read the "Whispers" in the *U.S. News* and when he saw that would think, "Ah, Busby's getting too big for his britches." Finally, poor Horace, or Buzz as we used to call him, his whole role there was writing this Rose Garden rubbish. It was pretty humiliating, and finally he left. So that left Valenti.

Now Valenti before was also in the running. He was gunning for that job of press secretary all because of the visibility. It's the one job in the White House that has, outside of the President's, a high degree of visibility. You get in the papers every day, your picture is on the front page of the *Post* and the *New York Times*, your wife is interviewed for the Sunday style section and so forth. Everybody else has to be reasonably anonymous, which kills them after a while, so they all look at the press secretary. They're all envious of the role of the press secretary. Valenti also had that.

There was one incident that discouraged Valenti, when down in Texas both Bill Moyers and his brother Jim had to go, neither one of them could be there. See, the President thought that Jim Moyers ought to maybe start doing the briefings. At any rate, neither one of them were there, and he threw Jack Valenti into it. I was up here in Washington. I forget what the story was, but anyway, Valenti called me and asked me to coach him and all that. Well, that one experience he had . . . . See, these fellows all saw the glamour, your picture on the front page of the *New York Times* and the *Post* and your being quoted and all that, but none of them knew about how twice a day your blood was all over the carpet. Well, Valenti went through this hair-raising experience for two days,

and Valenti pulled himself out of the running after that. He wasn't interested in being press secretary if this is what you had to go through.

G: You mentioned earlier that he had an interest in being ambassador to Rome or to the Vatican.

L: As a matter of fact he did, and the President planned to name him ambassador to Rome and had told the Pope when the President met with the Pope up in the Waldorf-Astoria. He kept telling the Pope that he was going to name Jack Valenti, his trusted aide. The Pope just didn't hear him and kept asking when was he going to stop bombing North Vietnam. Incidentally, I was not in that little room, but Moyers came out. He was coming out of there, and it was Moyers that told me that.

G: Now Marvin Watson moved in, and you mentioned earlier an incident that demonstrated the tension between Moyers and Watson on occasion, in regard to the press seats on the plane.

L: Yes. There was one time the President was going somewhere by helicopter and Moyers had told me to take four newspapermen with me, or three, I forget, and at the last minute we were bumped because Watson had decided he wanted to take three senators. I told Moyers about this, and Moyers got on that phone and in fury told Watson never do that to him again, that those seats were his. Then [he] turned to me and said, "When I tell you've got three seats for newspapermen on that helicopter you don't let anybody, including Marvin Watson, ever overrule me or I'll fire you." Well, this was the way it was for a couple of months. It changed later when I think Marvin Watson got the upper hand.

G: Did he really?

L: Yes.

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G: We were talking earlier about the idea of Bill Moyers building an empire there of his own people and placing them in different agencies, setting up his own operation. What insight do you have on this?

L: I knew that he had people planted in every agency in key jobs. They were Moyers men reporting to him. He had an espionage system in this government I thought unequalled by anybody, including anybody in the--well, maybe matched by the Nixon Administration. But in the Nixon Administration I think they were reporting back to several people in the White House--Colson, Ehrlichman and Haldeman. Here it was a one-man operation; they reported back to Bill Moyers and his deputy, Hayes Redmon, who has since died. But that was strictly his one-man operation.

G: Can you add anything on his relations with Robert Kennedy?

L: The only thing I can tell you about that is that he spent quite a bit of time with Bobby Kennedy. He was on the phone with him a lot, and once during a crisis, when I was in charge down in Texas and I had to get hold of him, finally by practically threatening the White House operators they put me through. And where was he? He was at a dinner party at Bobby Kennedy's house.

G: Did you talk to him?

L: I did, yes.

G: Did he indicate that you shouldn't say where he was?

L: Yes, as a matter of fact he said, "Don't tell anybody where you got me."

G: Was the President aware of his relationship with Robert Kennedy?

L: I think he was at first dimly aware of it. I'm sure he must have become more aware of it later.

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As a matter of fact, as I think I've indicated in some earlier taped conversations with you, when finally Moyers did leave there were two different versions I think in *Time* and *Newsweek*, one came from the President, the other from Moyers. The only thing the two stories had in common is that they drove around the countryside in Texas in the President's Lincoln Continental discussing his leaving. Only the Moyers version was that he was talking like to his father, trying to get his advice, and finally was convinced that that was the right thing for him to do, to take the job as publisher of *Newsday*. Whereas the other version, which obviously came from Lyndon Johnson or one of his assignees, was that indeed they had driven around for four or five hours and all that, all the time LBJ was quoted as saying, "All the time he was trying to get me to persuade him not to take the job, but I wouldn't." Incidentally, I'm still convinced that he had by this time in his affection, his image, Tom Johnson to replace Bill Moyers.

G: Was Tom Johnson working under Moyers at one time?

L: He was working under me at first, which meant he was under Moyers. He came into the White House. This was the first year of the White House Fellows Program, which at that time was sponsored by the Carnegie Institute, of which John Gardner was the president. They were paying for it, but after the first year John Gardner persuaded the President that the government should take over the cost. He was among the first batch. He came in, and Moyers told me to keep him under my wing and out of his way. I remember the first day that Tom Johnson came into town. It was the first day, and I asked Hal Pachios, who was a bachelor, "Look, would you take him out to dinner so he isn't alone? And also give me an idea of what he might be interested in what we can do with him, you know, what

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to do with him." The next morning Hal Pachios came in and said, "We don't have to worry about him. He's got it all figured out how he's going to run the press office."

So he went up, gradually Tom Johnson began to develop a relation. Mrs. Johnson liked him, and there was also a rather startling physical resemblance between him and Bill Moyers. He gradually shifted over, but he really didn't come into his own until Moyers left. Then when George Christian came in it was remarkable how those two men worked together and kept their peace, because George Christian was almost taking his orders from Tom Johnson.

G: They seem to have been very compatible, though.

L: One of the reasons for it is I don't think George Christian gave a damn as long as he was left alone and wasn't humiliated. But, I mean, I remember one morning when Tom Johnson called me at five o'clock in the morning from the President's bedroom and said, "The President wants you to go to Rome to get ready in case he decides to visit the Pope, because we're leaving for Australia. Nobody knows about this. Don't tell your wife and don't even tell George Christian." George Christian never showed that he could care one way or the other about this. But Tom Johnson was really in the ascendancy, and the last two years there, I mean there was nobody more important, I don't think anybody in the White House during the Johnson Administration had ever been the second most important man with as much authority and access as Tom Johnson, with the exception of Jenkins.

G: But did his access supersede that of Moyers?

L: Yes.

G: Really?



L: Or at least equaled it.

G: Liz Carpenter once suggested that there should be a staff person "unleashed," as Bill Moyers was, to perform the savvy interpretation or provide the background information.

L: Yes, and he was.

G: Is that right?

L: There was once a year-end report that he gave to the press down in Texas, as I recall, that was something like two hours long and brilliant.

G: Was part of his job to provide an interpretation to what the President said?

L: Yes.

G: That seems more like a columnist's job than a special assistant's job.

L: But he did this as the press secretary, which is also a special assistant. He was called press secretary, but his position as press secretary was not unlike that of Jody Powell's now. His relationship with the President is far beyond that which is usually that of a press secretary and his principal. Jody Powell has the complete confidence and access. Bill Moyers had that same kind of relationship and access. The only difference is that Bill Moyers had great political ambitions of his own, which were his prime motivation.

G: That's interesting.

L: Bill Moyers was good. There's no question about it. But I would tend to go along with George Reedy that Bill Moyers probably never had a creative idea in his head. But he was the best brain-picker I have ever met in my life. I don't say that in a denigrating sort of way. It's an art, and he had that art down to perfection. Mind you, this is a Baptist preacher. He combined all the flamboyancy and articulancy of a Baptist preacher with that of a press secretary, and he was quite impressive. When he did this year-ender,

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which I'm sure is on the record somewhere, it was a great performance. It was quite an exciting experience working for Moyers. The only things that I didn't understand about Moyers were lots of things that my wife Christine saw and told me at the time, and I was just blind to it. I rather think you'd have a hard time writing a complete oral history of the time without the full cooperation of Bill Moyers.

You asked me about Marvin Watson. I think the breach between him and the Moyers brothers was that Marvin Watson was an ultra-conservative and the Moyers boys were really southern liberals. But I'm reminded of one incident down at Texas, when word came early in the morning that it looked as though their father wouldn't last through the day. He was ill. The two of them chartered a one-engine plane to fly from Austin to--I forget this little town, there was no other way to get there, the airlines didn't touch there--to get to their father's bedside before he died. Moyers left and said, "Look, you take over the briefings. I don't know when we're coming back." The President, when I called him, said, "Look, don't tell them about their rushing to their father's bedside, because he may listen to the radio and the father shouldn't hear about this. Don't tell them anything about this."

I conducted the briefing, and then toward the end of it they said, "Where's Bill Moyers?" I said, "Well, he had to leave town on some personal matter." Somebody said, "There's a rumor around that he and his brother had to fly to the bedside of his father." I said, "Well, as a matter of fact, yes, that's true. The father is rather ill." All the news stories in Texas had this dramatic thing of chartering a plane and so forth, and along about two o'clock in the afternoon the President called me and said, "I thought I told you not to tell about Bill and Jim going out to this town where their father is sick." I said,

"Yes, Mr. President, but you know, they'd heard something about it. They asked me point blank, and I had my credibility to worry about. I tried to put it in the proper context." He said, "Yes. Now instead of any news today every radio program I turn to is about the dramatic flight of Bill and Jim rushing to the bedside of their dying father. It's all you hear on the air." Very interesting, the President of the United States obviously was jealous of these two assistants of his being cast in such a dramatic light.

G: Did he try to keep White House staff from giving interviews to the press and having stories done on them?

L: Yes.

G: Was there any standard policy here?

L: There was no policy; it was just understood. As a matter of fact, Joe Califano was a terribly frustrated man because every time he got a little publicity the President would crack down on him. Joe Califano, even today, is a very ambitious man; he was in those days, too. He wanted more visibility, and the President wouldn't give it to him, wouldn't permit him to have it. If anybody got too much attention, including the press secretaries, the President just didn't like it. There was only one man, numero uno, in that White House, and that was LBJ. Now he would build up some people, for instance, Harry McPherson. He would build up Harry with the press, but then even if Harry got too much publicity I think he would have cracked down on him.

But I remember in those days I used to smoke cigars. He saw me with a cigar in my hand once when he came into George Reedy's office, and he began to make all sorts of comments about the cigar. He said, "You know, Dick Goodwin always has to have a cigar in his hand." I forget exactly the reasons for it, but that irritated the hell out of him.

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The reason for this, of course, could have been that he wasn't allowed to smoke anymore. After he left the White House he went back to smoking cigarettes. Probably didn't help him any. But it used to irritate him, so you got to the point where when you knew he was going to be around you put your cigar away or your cigarette away. But that irritated the hell out of him.

Let me look at this memo and see if there's anything I can add to it.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview IV]

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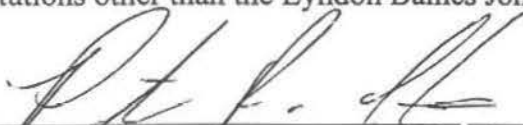
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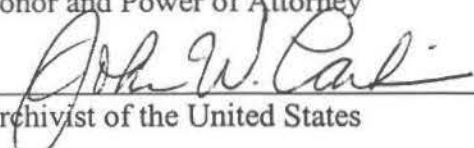
JOSEPH LAITIN

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

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

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