

INTERVIEWEE: GENE LATIMER

INTERVIEWER: DAVID G. MC COMB

August 17, 1971

M: Let's identify the tape first of all. This is an interview with Mr. Gene Latimer. I am in his home at 2408 Emerson in Denton, Texas. The day is Tuesday, August 17, 1971. It is 2:15 in the afternoon, and my name is David McComb.

Well, first of all, Mr. Latimer, I'd like to know when you first met Lyndon Johnson.

L: Dr. McComb, let me start it out as a sort of a story. Let's say it is an October day in 1930 at Sam Houston High School in Houston as I enter my speech class--shall I put in the punctuation?

M: Well, no, you don't need punctuation.

L: The class is normally presided over by the elderly and jolly G. Preston Smith, but today a tall young man with black curly hair and a confident air calls the roll and welcomes us. He is Lyndon B. Johnson, the future 36th President of the United States. I will be closely associated with him on part of his climb upward, at least until this day in August 1971, and he will be the best friend I shall ever have.

A few things become quickly apparent. This is a whole new ballgame. If I am to continue on the debate team, my outside activities will be largely confined to after-school practice and visits to the city library in the search of arcane references to the jury system, which is the subject selected for this year's high school debate. For the "Chief," as I and others come to call him, has already decided he will make state champions of us. At first he is not my favorite teacher. He impinges too much on

my hours of leisure. In practice he has no reticence in cutting me off in the middle of a sentence to comment on its inadequacy, and to make pointed suggestions for improvement. In competition he sits at the back of the auditorium and has an upsetting habit of frowning and ruefully shaking his head just when I think I am on the right track. But once in awhile he opens his mouth in amazement at how clearly I am making a point. He sits up very straight and looks about in wonderment at the audience to make sure they're not missing this. And it is then he makes me think I have just personally thought of, and am in the process of enunciating an improvement on the Sermon on the Mount.

He quickly becomes a favorite of students, teachers, the principal, and outstanding business executives in Houston, particularly in the newspaper field. He wants them all behind his team and there is no history of resistance except from rival schools. He organizes trips over the state to other schools who are debating the same subject, so that we could have more and more practice, and gets the editor of a local paper to contribute money--and this in the midst of a national depression--that in itself would defeat such a project unless it were conceived of and executed by Lyndon Johnson. So I put on my debating suit, inherited from a cousin 40 pounds heavier and 4 inches taller, and we all take off.

We live off the land, or rather off the debater's families, of the debate coaches, teachers, or his friends. And though we practiced even as we drive, we also sing and joke with the Chief leading.

M: You mean as you're going down the road and you're practicing the debate?

L: Yes. We sure are.

With the Chief leading the singing and the joking. And these are days to cherish and remember.

M: How many practice sessions did you have? How many of these were arranged before you went to the championship?

L: Well, I think my recollection is that we won without losing a single one--some seventy debates. On these trips, I don't know exactly how many debates we had the various trips, but my recollection is that we had seventy debates without a loss until the last one.

Well, we spend one night at the home of his mother and father in San Marcos, and during and after a meal prepared by his mother, he engages his father in a stream of political talk all very much over our heads, but he is in such high good humor we enjoy it anyway. So we practice, and we learn what he wants us to learn, and how to say it, and as we win the city championship for the first time in the school's history he meekly inquires of me if I think he may with application develop into as good a debate coach as his predecessor, G. Preston Smith.

The district meet is almost too easy and when we set out for Austin and the state finals, our school is probably more aware of its debate team than its football squad. The Chief has decided to make it that way and we have long since ceased to regard his efforts with anything other than awe. In Austin, it is evident that a few other teams have been practicing too. Nevertheless, we are down at last to the wire. Only one team stands between us and the coveted state championship. We do our best, and I think while the judges are out that it is enough. Then the announcement--we have lost by a vote of two to one. The look on our coach's face is one of disbelief, and my worst reaction is that in some way we have let him down. But he tells us that we have done well and he comforts us, and I think now that he was the one who deserved the most comfort.

Our return is anticlimactic, but no one thinks less of the Chief. He--all of us--have had a bad break, but he doesn't complain. He is never to complain, at least outwardly. Even when he loses his first bid for the Senate by a very thin and suspect margin, he is a good loser for appearance's sake, but he never forgets. As I look back, I doubt that he would have changed very much. He always works himself and everyone else to the limit after planning to the best of his considerable ability, then abides by the decision, and moves along with no change in pace either to achieve the result in another way or to the next goal he has set for himself.

The loss in May 1931 at Austin came as school closed for the summer. But September found Lyndon Johnson restless and eager, more determined than ever to produce a state championship team. The players had changed a little. My old partner L. E. Jones had graduated, and I would one day marry one of the new members of the girls' team, Marjorie Nelson. We worked hard for him--and he for us--until the last part of November when Richard M. Kleberg, of King Ranch fame, was elected to the 14th Congressional District, and the Chief became his secretary.

As might be expected, he was influential in the selection of his successor at Sam Houston, a former fellow student at San Marcos State Teachers College, and he continued his interest in us, even from Washington. His training stood us in good stead for both the boys and girls teams won the city and district finals, but the championship eluded once more by one vote.

I graduated in May 1932, but I kept in touch with the Chief and our ways were destined to cross again soon. The father of my high school sweetheart lived in Washington, D.C., and he brought his daughter there to go to college. This state of affairs continued until about the first

of December 1932 when the Chief told my father and mother he would find some way for me to work with him and go to college in Washington. And so I went, there to join the Chief at nights in a basement room we shared at the Dodge Hotel, and to work during the day in Mr. Kleberg's office. I recall the only course I ever flunked in high school was a half unit in typing. Two months after arrival in Washington under the Chief's close scrutiny I could type 85 words a minute with few errors, proving not only that practice makes perfect, but that plenty of practice--and I had that--makes even more perfect.

He wrote my folks of my work with him and my mother prizes highly the long-hand letters he wrote on stationery from the Dodge Hotel at night reporting on the progress of "our boy." They represent just another facet of his many-sided self--understanding, sentiment, a sense of responsibility for those he has decided to help.

Members of Congress have so-called "patronage" jobs at their disposal, the number and pay for which is largely determined by the member's seniority. Another little known factor in their assignment is "know-how," and by the time I arrived the Chief had that in abundance, including how to get such jobs at the Capitol as elevator operator, post office employee, House doorkeeper for the gallery, etc. In some offices these jobs went to relatives or sons of the members close friends, and after the job was over (and the hours were not long) the employee was at leisure.

The Chief had a slightly different concept. In order to handle the amount of correspondence his fertile brain decided was requisite to keeping up strong political fences in the district, more office help was needed than the regular office appropriation would permit. So after performance of the duties of whatever patronage job one might have as a result of

Mr. Kleberg's House membership, it was understood that the employee then reported for his real job to the Chief. Therefore, although I had a prize patronage job with the House post office, in between mail deliveries and after the last one, I was engaged in seeing how many letters I could get out for Mr. Kleberg's signature, executed and approved by Mr. Johnson.

Mr. Kleberg was a bluff and good natured, multi-millionaire who, I think, had no particular interest in being a congressman except for the prestige and the opportunity to play golf, and well, at a good club, live luxuriously at the Shoreham Hotel and spent some time looking after cattle legislation pending before the House Committee on Agriculture. He was also an excellent Spanish scholar with many friends in high circles in Mexico and would frequently record long letters to them in Spanish taxing my small lingual ability to the extreme in their transcription, and irritating the Chief slightly because the recipients were not constituents. But by the time I had come to Washington it was evident the congressman reposed complete confidence in his secretary to run his office and to make suggestions for his well-being both political and otherwise. In short, the Chief was the congressman from the Texas 14th district in all but name.

I recall that contrary to most office arrangements, the Chief had his desk immediately inside the entrance door, so that one coming in could not possibly advance further without his interception. And here the congressman's business was run, except when a good friend or an important person called. The Chief would steer him into Mr. Kleberg's private office for discussion. Here at the entrance too, was where he weeded out the casual visitor who just "happened to be in town," talked with him 30 seconds, and had him out of the office and on his way in

another 30, happily clutching an autographed photo of the congressman and passes to the House and Senate galleries. All the while the typewriters never lost a beat. Did you want to ask me a question?

M: Yes. I wanted to ask about what life was like at the Dodge Hotel when you were there as a young man.

L: Well, the Dodge Hotel was an extremely respectable place, almost totally inhabited by elderly widows, but the basement was used for impecunious persons such as ourselves. It was here that many of the secretaries of members of the House and Senate resided. I can recall that when work was finished on many occasions the Chief, Bob Jackson, who is now head of the Corpus Christi Caller Times, and Arthur Perry who at that time was secretary to Senator Tom Connally, walked together from the Capitol complex over to the Dodge. After washing up we usually went together to someplace to eat. Our financial situation was such that this turned out to be, in most instances, Child's Restaurant, a place close to the Dodge and also close to the Union Station. When I think of Child's I think of a little discussed side of the Chief and that is that prior to his marriage to Lady Bird he had an eye for girls with pretty faces and figures and did not regard too much what was behind those faces. One of the beautiful young ladies at Child's succumbed almost instantly, at least after two or three nights, and I was not to see the Chief until the early hours of the morning.

As for the Dodge itself, during the winter the pipes hammered from steam, but it was a place that we all used together for animated discussions always led by Lyndon Johnson. One little sidelight--this was during prohibition and the Chief with his usual flare for arranging things had arranged for a small medicinal supply of whiskey upon occasion. I remember

that once when he was out on a date I took advantage of the high quality of the whiskey and helped myself to it. When he returned the next morning he noticed the level of the bottle and made haste to comment on it. This almost caused a rupture in our relations, but he forgave me as he was always to do, and life went ahead anyway.

Well, I should have recalled at the time the omniscience of the Chief about anything relating to finances and that to him a good credit record was as important as the virginity of a proud Southerner's daughter--more so in fact. I made about \$25 the first month I was there, \$57 the second, and then in March of 1933 I was allowed the patronage job of post office carrier which paid a munificent salary of about \$130 a month. Still I couldn't make ends meet and finally one or two local merchants called the Chief to let him know I was in serious arrears on such things as my cleaning bill, a clothing account and several others.

A hasty conference was scheduled and held during which I listed for him all the bills I could think of, and he added some that he knew about himself. I agreed to turn all my checks over to him for the emergency. For his part he would assume all the bills, and get them paid little by little. So began for me the long drought. Each pay day he would call me in for a budget hearing. I would disclose all that had occurred during the interim, endorse, and hand over my check. He would write out small payments on account over his signature to each of my debtors. At the conclusion of the session, he would then give me a weekly allowance (about \$10 I think) for eating, smoking, transportation to college, and other vices and niceties of life. But I never questioned the procedure, indeed it just seemed to follow as a matter of course.

He was forever busy, but never too busy to involve himself in the



smallest details of those about him. And this was one of them. If his ways seemed harsh at the moment, and they sometimes did, his actions always later proved to be in my best interests. But I continued to have trouble with my finances, and once when the pain had been severe for some time I summoned up the considerable courage it took to ask the President about the possibility of a small increase in salary. He listened with sympathetic concern, commented at some length on the shortage of money and jobs all over the country at the time and especially in our own office, then told me he had been thinking for some time on how to reward the excellent work I had been doing. He had finally decided that I merited having my name put on the office stationery as "assistant secretary." As he described the prestige and glory of such an arrangement I could see the printing stand out six inches. Before we were finished had he given me the option of a \$500 a month raise or my name and new title on the stationery, I would have chosen the latter without question, convinced I had had much the best of the bargain.

I imagine it is still an unwritten rule among government agencies to call members of Congress and advise them when loans or grants of various kinds have been approved in order that they may be the first to notify political friends and/or local newspapers in their state or congressional district. The procedure is to call first the senior senator then the junior senator and lastly the member of the House in whose district the project lies. Some senators and members of the House were a little slow to take credit for assisting on these projects. Not so, Lyndon Johnson. In fact while in the House as secretary and a member he brought the procedure to a fine art.

In those days both Western Union and postal telegraph offered

competitive services with offices in the House office buildings as well as the Senate. The President called a conference of the managers of the two telegraph companies and put to them the following proposition: Since his office (or Mr. Kleberg's) sent telegrams by the hundreds annually, and were excellent customers, he proposed to call both their offices simultaneously when he had a telegram to send out and the messenger boy who arrived first would get the business for his employer, the other would return out of breath and empty handed.

The result of this was little short of phenomenal. Each manager kept his most agile boy on standby ready for a fast run when a call from our office was received. It became pretty rapidly known that when messenger boys were seen running pell-mell down the corridors they were not necessarily delivering messages from President Roosevelt, but more likely were trying to beat another also on his way to Lyndon Johnson. A few feelings may have been jarred on the Senate side when this procedure became known, but it was hard to take umbrage at a young man with such a facile mind.

I think it was sometime during that first year that mail fell off a little for some reason or other and we were receiving perhaps no more than double that of the usual member. This condition was intolerable for the Chief and since the time of the year was right he decided that each boy and girl graduating from high school in the 14th district that year should have a personal letter of congratulations from his congressman, commenting on this glorious achievement.

So began the collection of lists and concurrently the production of forty or fifty letters, different, so the graduates would not receive the same letter. L. E. Jones, my old debate partner from Houston, had come up by now and was firmly established in the Dodge basement, and in the

office. And so each of us had a set of these different letters and with them the list we'd need. We had only to take the names in order and write each a personal letter from the congressman. The Chief has a knack, or better said, a genius for getting the most out of those around him. And daily during this project he would grin at one or the other and observe, "Gene (or L. E.), it sounds like he's getting them out a little faster than you are!" And so we whacked away harder and harder, and faster and faster until we could recite those letters from left to right and from bottom to top.

In the fall of 1934 the Chief met Lady Bird Taylor in Austin, immediately decided she should be his wife, and told her so. Apparently she was impressed but not stampeded, and I have often wondered what must have gone through her mind as he pursued her relentlessly. He had to return to Washington shortly after their first meeting and his proposal had not been accepted. The details of their courtship and marriage have been recited many times elsewhere. I only recall that after he returned from Austin, the office schedule was slightly altered in one important aspect. The first thing he did upon arrival was to go into Mr. Dick's office, there to continue his courtship via the U.S. mails.

Lady Bird was a journalism major while at the University of Texas and he dedicated to these daily letters the same meticulous detail he gave to every to-drawer project. He would frequently read a sentence and ask me whether a comma or a semicolon were called for, or check the spelling of a word.

In November he went back to Texas and returned with Lady Bird, now Mrs. Lyndon Baines Johnson. I don't think Lady Bird ever had a chance once he set eyes on her, and again his instinct in marriage was as sure as in politics--there is no finer, more thoughtful lady than the President's

wife. I have never heard her say an unkind word or seen her perform an unkind deed--she has loved him as a wife and with the same unquestioning devotion that we give him as a friend. She has worked unceasingly at his side.

Since I'm on the subject of marriages I should mention my own, particularly as the President played an active role in it. I believe that I said earlier that my desire to go to Washington stemmed not so much from interest in politics as a desire to be near Marjorie Nelson, who was going to the University there. She was a favorite from his Houston speech class, and he joined in my dismay when he learned that she had frantically called me in July of 1935 to say that her father had bought for her immediate use, train tickets to California where he planned for her to finish her medical education. There are, of course, closer medical schools but the fact was that he did not approve of me and the point is immaterial now. Nevertheless consternation reigned supreme. I almost sobbed my way into the Chief's office to find him ready with the suggestion, "Why don't you marry her before her train leaves?"

It sounded so simple but it was a complete checkmate. We were much in love, she promptly agreed to the change in plans and I told her I would call her back in a little while. During this time the President had gone to see Mr. Kleberg, secured a \$100 wedding present from him and arranged for us to use either his own or Mr. Kleberg's car. As we started putting things in the car he realized it was the 4th of July and that we might have trouble getting a license on Independence Day even in Rockwell, [Rockville] Maryland. He called to fix this. Then he remembered stores were closed and we had no ring. This produced another call to Lady Bird and a swing by their home to borrow the much advertised dimestore ring Dan Quill had

hastily bought for their own marriage in San Antonio. And so we were finally off, wiring her father as we left that due to unforeseen circumstances, such as a wedding, she would be unable to use the California train ticket.

We were married on schedule and the Chief had arranged for us to have a couple of days in Atlantic City for our honeymoon. But once out from under his watchful eye I lost my senses and we strolled the Boardwalk all afternoon in the July sun. I had to get a doctor for a second degree burn from top to bottom and it goes without saying that although the marriage was legal it was little else for some days while I recovered.

To round out this event the Chief realized early that my salary (even counting the value of my name on the stationery) simply would not permit us to subsist as man and wife and eat with any degree of regularity. Accordingly he briefed Mr. Dick on the situation, and had him call the director of the newly established Federal Housing Administration to give him the opportunity to avail himself of my services. I can remember now as though it were yesterday that took place with the Chief listening in on one phone extension and me on another. As they discussed the salary considerations, the FHA director suggested that he might be able to place me at \$2,400 per annum, a very rich opportunity for those depression times.

The President immediately covered the extension and called, "Make it \$2,600," to Mr. Dick in a loud stage whisper. And so it was. I went to work in one large room of the FHA containing about forty-five employees doing exactly the same thing as I with one minor exception. They all received \$1,120 per annum, except the supervisor (an ex-congressman with a salary of \$2,400 per annum), and me, with \$200 a year more than the boss

himself.

A little later I would go to Texas to campaign in the President's first and successful try for Congress. But the story I've just outlined represents only one of the many ways in which he has altered my life, helped me without thought for self, and with my happiness only in mind. Small wonder that he deserves and has the total loyalty and devotion not only of me but of hundreds he has helped along the way.

Shortly before I went to work--yes?

M: Are you going to get into the '38 campaign?

L: Yes.

M: The reason I interrupt here is there is some story about his running the Little Congress in Washington, are you going to comment on it?

L: Oh. No, I had thought it was covered elsewhere.

M: You think that story's been pretty well taken care of?

L: Well, I've seen it in every biography and I think it is adequate. He, as might be expected, found out that it existed and decided to use it as a vehicle for other things. He organized all of us who were closely associated with him to attend on election night and elect him to be speaker. Normally the organization was very small, very dull, and elections came as a matter of course. On this particular night the committee room that was given over to the meeting was full of people that no one knew, but who were nevertheless eligible to vote because they were employees of members of the House. That was a very great surprise to the three or four who were regulars and attended dull meetings.

From the time he took it over it was no longer dull. He got many influential members of Congress from the House and from the Senate to come over and

talk. I can remember in some way he got Huey Long to come over and at that time when Huey Long was about to speak or he was speaking on the floor of the Senate word would spread like fire all over the Capitol and everyone would rush over to hear him. Huey Long was quite a drawing card in his day. He was a very interesting, flamboyant man, one who could have been, in some other country--a dictator. We may have been close to it, I don't know. But he was a very, very powerful man in those times.

M: Another question. Were you going to law school all this time too?

L: I went to George Washington University for about a year and a half, then I went for three years to Washington College of Law.

M: It was during this period that you were in Washington?

L: Yes. Let's see. Then shortly before I went to work at my new job at the Federal Housing Administration, taken in order to support my new family, the National Youth Administration was established by President Roosevelt to put to work unemployed boys who couldn't find anything to do in this very real and terrible depression. Lyndon Johnson became the Texas state director and there's no point in my going into that. The records show his almost phenomenal success. I do recall that when the national director resigned President Roosevelt asked Mr. Johnson if he would take the job. But an event had occurred in February of 1937 which was to give him an opportunity to become a member of Congress in his own right.

M: You mean 1937?

L: '37. This was the death of Representative James P. Buchanan of the 10th district, which included Lyndon Johnson's home county. The story of how he beat eight or nine candidates in the special election that followed April 10 is, I think, well known. I only want to insert here the small

part I played in it.

When I heard in Washington that the Chief had announced, I called him long distance to ask if he could use any help and he told me he wished I were there. So that same day I told my supervisor that Lyndon Johnson needed me in Texas and that I was on my way. We were the best of friends, he was an admirer of Mr. Johnson, and promised to tell anyone who inquired that I had to leave unexpectedly for Texas to settle an estate. So after spending that Friday at work, arranging the leave, I took off in my second-hand car about 5 p.m., drove all Friday night, all Saturday and Saturday night, and arrived in Austin around noon on Sunday. I was too exhausted to do anything except pass out. And I did just that for about twenty-four hours at the Driskill Hotel, after which I reported to Ray Lee, who seemed to have the title of campaign manager.

Headquarters was the mezzanine of the Driskill and when I finally joined in it was already in full swing. Details of the campaign, as I say, would be repetitious. What I do want to point out is that I found already on hand many of the Chief's old friends from Mr. Kleberg's district, who had moved into headquarters along with me wanting to know only how and where they could help. I especially recall Sam Fore, Jr. of Floresville in the 14th district who had dropped everything upon hearing of the announcement. I saw all 400-plus pounds of him rushing up the mezzanine stairs at a rate calculated to induce apoplexy, eager to throw his considerable political acumen into the pot. The Chief was everywhere night and day--that was to be expected. But I thought again that a person must have a rare gift indeed to move so many people to personal involvement for friendship's sake alone.

At the end the Chief was exhausted and it was providential that he



had to stop to be operated on for appendicitis just before the election, although he was hardly out from under the ether before he had a roomful of telegrams of congratulations. He had done the impossible again. He was a member of the House of Representatives. I packed up quietly and went on back to Washington where I worked for about another year until I got homesick for Texas, and with a wave of the Chief's wand I was office manager of the FHA Houston district.

About a year later I was droning through the mechanics of FHA processing when I had a phone call and a familiar voice said, "What are you doing there instead of here with me? How about getting in the car and driving to Galveston this afternoon so I can see you?" I told the district director I would be gone for the rest of the day, and that Friday afternoon saw Congressman Johnson in Galveston, where he was taking a brief breather. He told me his secretary Sherman Birdwell was going to be doing something else and asked me to take the job. When I inquired about details of resignation from FHA and other customary red tape, he simply said to be in Austin the following Monday ready for work.

So I returned to Houston that afternoon, packed my bags, and set off for Austin. I assume he took care of the paperwork connected with my leaving in typical Lyndon Johnson fashion. At least no one ever complained. Many accomplishments were recorded by him during the ensuing months, but almost a year to the day later--in August of 1939, I believe--nature took its toll and I had what is commonly called a breakdown. I requested he relieve me of my duties, which he did with the greatest sympathy and understanding. After successful recuperation I asked him if he would help me go back to FHA. As I might have expected, he arranged for me to become a mortgage risk examiner in San Antonio at the district office there. My replacement as his secretary was John Connally. And John's career began with my

departure.

Another little story may be interesting to some. After a year in San Antonio the chief FHA underwriter there had an opportunity to go to Chicago to work for a large private building concern associated with the Weyerhaeuser Lumber Company, and asked me to go with him. I did, and was there when World War II was declared. I volunteered for the Navy a couple of weeks thereafter, and very shortly was hit by a car outside the Great Lakes Naval Training Station, winding up with two broken legs and casts from waist to toes. My wife Marjorie also about this time had the good sense to divorce me in Chicago.

In any event about the time I was volunteering the President was doing likewise. He had told the people of the 10th Congressional District that if he ever found it necessary to vote to send their sons to war he would at that time put on a uniform himself, and he kept that promise to the letter. Since he was on the Naval Affairs Committee it was only natural that he sign up for the Navy, as had I.

Som months later, while I was still on crutches, I received a telegram saying he would be passing through Chicago on his way back to Washington and would like to see me. President Roosevelt had decided that he and the few other members who joined the services could be best utilized in Congress and he had ordered them back to the Capitol. I met the Chief in Chicago on my crutches and we talked for a few minutes in between trains. In a few more weeks I recovered without incident and was assigned to the Naval Pier in Chicago.

As a sailor I thought the least I could do was live it up in the tradition of Navy men while not at sea and I had just been restricted to base for thirty days for some infraction of the rules dealing with

misconduct "ashore." I had just begun serving out my restriction when I was summoned to the Office of the Commanding Officer and told that he had received orders to transfer me to the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington. This was a little unusual to say the least, for a second-class petty officer, but I did have enough understanding about the President to recognize his clear hand in these stereotyped orders. I asked the commanding officer about my restriction and he only told me that I had twenty-four hours to "clear the base" and to get going.

So I sold my car for a couple of hundred dollars and took the first train to Washington. I arrived there on a Sunday and instead of reporting to the receiving station as called for in my orders, I checked in at the home of the Chief who was discussing some affairs with John Connally at his own home. I remember I saluted at the door and asked the Chief if this was the naval training station to which he replied in the affirmative and told me to come on in. Then he told John to call someone in the Navy and tell them not to worry about me. I had reported to the right receiving station all right.

It seems that when President Roosevelt ordered him back to Congress the Chief lost no time in taking up the reins that Lady Bird had been temporarily holding and had established a subcommittee for the investigation of Naval personnel. He was the chairman, of course. My job, as he explained it, was to help run part of the committee office, but in civilian clothes in order not to confuse any captains or other high ranking officers of whom I might ask questions, or cause any disciplinary problems with any WAVE ensigns who had been assigned to the subcommittee, since I was only a second-class petty officer.

I stayed with the Chief and Lady Bird at their home on 30th Place and things were pretty much as in the old days, except that every two weeks

I put on my dress whites with petty officer insignia and reported to the disbursing officer long enough to draw my pay check, then slipped back into civies and resumed investigating personnel of the Navy department.

The subcommittee performed enviably as could have been expected with Lyndon Johnson at its helm, but finally its work was finished and I asked him if I could go to sea. A couple of days later I had orders to report to a minesweeper out of Staten Island. I stayed aboard her eighteen months until I made chief petty officer at which time I called the boss about having someone in the Navy department cut orders to put me on a larger ship, like an aircraft carrier, one that would maybe see some action.

The orders came through without delay and I reported to a Navy yard in the East to be a part of the ship's company of a new carrier. The only difficulty was that after a couple of weeks I found that the keel for the ship had just been laid and it would be two or three years before I could hope to see any blue water. So I called again, and he responded once more. This time he must have been pretty explicit since my orders were to proceed to Seattle and there join the crew of the U.S.S. Lexington in for repairs from Japan, and bound for Pacific Ocean action.

I stayed aboard the Lexington until the war was over and upon return was hospitalized at the Naval Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. I had kept in touch with the Chief and I see from my files that I was discharged from the hospital and the Navy in May 1946, and went back to work for him on the following day. Just before my discharge I had also acquired a wife, and he found her a job as well in order to supplement my salary.

For a time my wife Frances and I lived in his attic, converted to a bedroom, and I can still hear him telling me plaintively not to make so much noise as I went up the stairs coming in late from work, and waking

me early the next morning to fetch the papers and Congressional Record from the lawn.

A little later my wife and I found an apartment and while he was digesting papers and making innumerable phone calls from home I was hurrying to the office to open the mail. One of his calls from the house would be to me at the office at 8:00 a.m. where I would have read and separated all the mail which had come in the first of several deliveries. His invariable question, "What's in the mail this morning," was my cue to begin reading all letters of which I believed he would have a particular interest. The scope of that interest was always high; sometimes reading would take a good hour, after which I would either receive a, "Much obliged, see you later," or a series of orders and messages for myself and others.

One more thing and I shall be done. Biographers and news media alike have libelously stated that Lyndon Johnson treated his staff with demands amounting to inhumanity or brutality. I would not feel right if I did not try to set the record straight while giving this little thumbnail sketch. Certainly my qualifications should not be questioned since I was undeniably there on the receiving end from the very beginning. In the first place if this below-the-belt charge had any foundation, I wonder why we have not heard more about it from those who were directly concerned! That is, those who worked for him.

I will not attempt to name them here since biographers have spent an inordinate amount of time investigating who they were. But the wonder of it is in doing so why they did not take the next obvious step and ask these people, before hurrying into print with their ridiculous comment, about their relationship with the Chief. A reasonable statement would be

that Lyndon Johnson is hard and he is tough, extremely so, but those attributes are not reserved for his staff. Someone should say--and I do say--that no one under him ever worked harder than he himself. And that far from being ruthless to his employees, their welfare was very important to him. He was and is extremely sentimental about the people who are close to him. I have seen him moved to tears reading the letter from the mother he adored who never ceased to tell him of her aspirations for and confidence in him.

I wish those carpers who write about his "driving" people could see him as I have, driving himself late at night in such activities as signing mountains of letters with his right hand frequently wrapped in a hand towel to keep blood from dripping because of a severe rash that made him suffer with each signature as he refused to stop before completion. I wish the world could know how many times he has reached out and given me not just words of comfort, but brought about the deeds to change my entire life for the better. Small wonder that those of us who were with him when the going was tough resent very deeply statements by those who don't know who say he was ruthless to us out of their pique and ignorance.

I was not working for him at the time of his presidency when his burdens were hardest of all, but even then he did not let the bonds of our friendship lessen. I have not now, nor have I ever had any "political following" or influence at the polls. Yet we received invitations to dinner at the White House, framed pictures inscribed with words of affection, and an obviously personal letter from him to my son who was seriously injured, when he was the nation's Commander-in-Chief. And after he stepped down, invitations to the ranch during one of which last

summer I broke a wrist and found him at my side in the hospital as I woke up from the anesthetic, followed a couple of nights later when I had returned home by a thoughtful long distance call from Lady Bird and him to see how I was progressing.

One doesn't count many friends like that in a lifetime. And so-called writers shouldn't be permitted to get away with playing such dirty pool, even though I understand why the President does not degrade himself by even recognizing it. I am in a little different situation, however, since I have been part of that "staff" about which they have written so loosely. Yes, I would have to say that the President can be a hard man, all right. He is also a courageous and tenacious one and I would not want someone holding my very life in his hands as my President to be otherwise.

So, as I tie a knot around these fragments about Lyndon Johnson, I want my estimate sound and clear: he is to me the greatest living man in America. That is how this particular "staff man" remembers the "harassment" of him.

[pause]

M: I've just asked Mr. Latimer the question, what his connections were with Lyndon Johnson at the end of the 1940's and later.

L: In response to this, there came a time as there usually did when my financial needs were greater than could be satisfied at the office. Along in the first part of 1952 I told the Chief that I was homesick for Texas again and indicated to him that I would like to have a job back home and also one that would be better for me financially. He was his usual thoughtful self about this and in a few days told me he had arranged for me to work for the Federal Civil Defense Administration in Dallas, Texas.

So in April of that year I again changed employment.

Although the name of the agency has changed with the years I remained with it until my retirement in November of 1969. During this period I naturally kept in touch with the Chief and he with me. For example, he notified me he would be in the area in October of 1959 and I met him at the Denton airport. We visited the Office of Civil Defense and since I had been with the agency for some time without their recognizing my sterling qualities, he was kind enough to call them to their attention while he was here and within the week I had received a considerable raise in pay as well as the title of Deputy Director of Field Operations.

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By Gene Latimer

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

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