

Special Interview

DATE: April 16, 1970

INTERVIEWEE: LYNDON B. JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

J: Do you want to ask that question?

G: Yes, did you receive support in that election--the 1937 congressional election--from anyone in the Roosevelt Administration, such as Postmaster General [James] Farley or Harold Ickes during their visits to Texas?

J: I recall specifically General Farley's visit to Austin and seeing him here. My memory is that he acted strictly neutral in the election.

G: Let me back up just one minute, Mr. President. It has been remembered by Thomas Corcoran that when you were about to resign your NYA [National Youth Administration] post to run for the congressional seat, the Administration, especially Aubrey Williams, thought that you were doing such an excellent job with the NYA that they tried to dissuade you from running for Congress. Did President Roosevelt or Mr. Corcoran or anyone in the Administration call you?

J: No, I think I would remember if the President had called me. It could have been that Mr. Corcoran talked to me. I know that Mr. Williams did try to dissuade me and asked me to continue in the post that I was then serving in.

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Congressman [Maury] Maverick, at the solicitation of Professor Robert Montgomery, raised some questions about my ability to win and asked me to carefully consider all of the elements in the picture before resigning as NYA Director, but I do not recall that the President had anything to do with it.

G: Now, on entering the Congress, can you recall the specifics of your meeting with President Roosevelt in Galveston after your election to Congress?

J: Yes, I was informed by Governor [James] Allred that the President desired me to join the train at Galveston. When the President got off the ship, I was presented to him, and he invited me to ride back on the train. I did ride back with him. We had a good conversation on the train. We talked about my election; we talked about my future in Washington, including my committee assignments and other matters pertaining to my service.

G: Can you remember his response to your election, other than just . . .

J: I think he was very pleased with it because of the type of campaign that was waged.

G: Did he ever say to you that he considered this a victory for him as well as for you?

J: No, but I think he did. I might say that I don't, as I dictate this, specifically recall his saying that, although that was the specific impression that I have of his feeling.

G: Now, do you remember any conversation that you had with President Roosevelt during that trip on Naval Affairs?

J: Yes. Yes, he suggested to me that I go on that committee and told me the reasons he wanted me to go on it; that he could foresee the need of strengthening our defense, that he was being criticized by members of Congress for taking some of the funds appropriated for the PWA [Public Works Administration] and other relief projects and putting them

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into the employment of men in shipyards, and that he felt we had to strengthen our navy, and that we would have to continue to do this, and he would like to see me on the Naval Affairs Committee, and see the Texas delegation support him in the action he was taking.

G: Did he help you gain a seat on that committee?

J: Yes, yes.

G: Would you care to specify what he did to your knowledge?

J: He asked Congressman Fred Vinson of Kentucky to come to see him at the White House. While he was there, he asked him to get me assigned to committee, and Congressman Vinson complied with that request and did.

G: Did he ask you to--did he give you Thomas Corcoran's number or other people's numbers--it has been said by them and some others that he said, "Here's a friend of mine that I want you to help out when he comes to Washington." Can you remember the specifics about this?

J: I remember the President gave me Jimmy's number--Jimmy Roosevelt's number--on the train going up and told me to call him after we got settled and talk to him about the committee assignment and other matters. Perhaps, he gave me Tommy "the Cork's" number, too. I just don't recall that.

G: Now, when you first became a congressman, can you remember ways in which the Administration, particularly people in the White House, such as Mr. James Rowe or Grace Tully or Thomas Corcoran would assist you as a freshman congressman?

J: Yes, they were extremely helpful to me all the time. Every request I made. Those requests came in the form of damming and controlling the Colorado River, aid for the farmers, aid for the youth projects, public buildings, public grants for electric systems,

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and so forth. And Tom Corcoran, Ben Cohen, Grace Tully, and Missy LeHand, Secretary [Harold] Ickes, Secretary Wallace, Milo Perkins--all of them were quite helpful and spent a lot of time trying to help me make good.

G: Can you describe your success in getting the President's support for the development of the Lower Colorado River?

J: Well, President Roosevelt was a great conservationist and was quite interested in conserving the waters of the Colorado that were emptying wastefully into the Gulf of Mexico, and he realized that this was a multi-purpose project where we could have dams that would provide conservation in terms of water and soil conservation. We could get hydroelectric power and give cheap electricity in both the rural and city areas and would be a great recreational benefit. And he thought this was a sound project, and he personally got behind it, and that except for his assistance, it never would have been built. It's one of the most fully developed rivers in our state, and it's a great tribute, I think, to President Roosevelt's vision.

G: Was this the subject of your first White House meeting with President Roosevelt? Can you remember?

J: I don't recall what the subject of my first one was, but I had many discussions with the President and people in the Administration about the Colorado River development.

G: Did you show him some pictures of dams at one time and impress him with them?

J: Yes.

G: Did other people in the White House and Administration besides the President help to expedite this project?

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- J: Yes. Secretary Ickes did. Tommy Corcoran did. Ben Cohen, Justice [William] Douglas. Senator [Alvin] Wirtz was the general counsel for the Lower Colorado River Authority, and he was a friend of all these people and a great lawyer--a great human being--and he worked very closely with all of us on it.
- G: Can you remember where you first had the conception of this project?
- J: Yes. When I was a boy in college, Senator Wirtz had been the attorney for the Samuel Insull interests, who started building this dam, and they went broke in the 1929 crash. The dam was half built and had not been completed, so Senator Wirtz conceived the idea of creating a state authority that would have the charter to borrow money and issue bonds. So, he got the legislature to approve this. We got President Roosevelt interested in it, and he bought the bonds that the state issued. And Senator Wirtz and others built the dam.
- G: What about the novel idea of linking this up to the Rural Electrification Administration? Was this your own idea, do you remember?
- J: I was very active in it because I lived in a small town, and we never had central station service. So I went to President Roosevelt with it and got him to prevail upon the REA to make a substantial grant to develop what later turned out to be the world's largest REA.
- G: Now let's see, can you describe President Roosevelt's choice of you as administrator of the Rural Electrification Administration and the circumstances thereof?
- J: He was kind enough to offer me the appointment. I seriously considered it. I concluded that it would be better for me to continue working in the Congress. I could be more effective on more things there, and I wanted a legislative career at that time. He wrote me a letter offering it to me, and I wrote him a letter declining.

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- G: Mr. President, in the 1940 congressional elections . . .
- J: I'm not sure that he wrote me a letter offering it to me. He tendered it to me, and I believe I declined it, and he wrote me a letter expressing regret that I had not taken it.
- G: In the 1940 congressional elections, your role in helping Democratic congressmen that had a good chance to win, raising money for them, was this your own incentive, or did the White House ask you to do this? Do you remember?
- J: Well, I'm sure that I was glad to do anything I could to help congressmen get elected; first, because I liked the congressmen; second, because I wanted to see a Democratic Congress; and finally, I wanted the President to have people who would work with him. The President and Mr. James Rowe, and Secretary Ickes and all of them helped me, and I thought that we had a rather effective campaign.
- G: Can you describe the work that you did here?
- J: Yes, we prepared speeches; we sent speakers into districts; we raised money, and gave all the congressmen financial assistance from the committee. And we did what a central campaign committee group would do. We kept it very closely coordinated with James Rowe at the White House, and President Roosevelt himself was quite helpful.
- G: I understand that President Roosevelt talked to you the night of the congressional victories in that election, congratulating you on your work, or something of this sort?
- J: He was very good to me during that period. He told me, I think, that he approved of what we had done here.
- G: Now, in the 1940 presidential campaign there was a sizable split among the Texans, and there were a number of incidents, I think, where President Roosevelt enlisted your help. One, and I have never heard anything really conclusive on this, but as a refutation to John

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L. Lewis' scathing condemnation of Vice President [John Nance] Garner as being a "whiskey-drinking, labor-baiting, evil old man." And all the Texans got together to issue a refutation. Did President Roosevelt ask you not to support him so that you might line up with him?

J: No, as I recall it, the Texas delegation proposed an endorsement of Mr. Garner and stated that Mr. Garner was a very progressive legislator and that he should receive the consideration of the country for the Democratic nomination. Because I wanted President Roosevelt to run again, and because I thought that it was essential that he run because of the war clouds that were then on the horizon and our probability of being involved, I felt that it was no time to change horses; I refused to sign that statement until it was considerably moderated. I made it very clear that I felt very kindly toward Mr. Roosevelt.

G: Did the President congratulate you on your stand here?

J: I don't recall that.

G: I know that word did get back to the White House through Harold Ickes, I guess.

J: I don't know.

G: It's in his memoirs.

Can you describe the time when you and Speaker [Sam] Rayburn were present at the White House to issue a joint statement?

J: Yes, they had the Democratic convention in Waco, and we discussed how best to avoid a big split in the Democratic Party. We finally concluded that it would be agreeable--if it were agreeable to the President--to send a wire to the leadership of that convention saying that the delegation could go pledge to Garner on the first ballot, provided that if Roosevelt's name were placed in nomination and he were available for the third term

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nomination, the Texas delegation would go to Roosevelt before the tally was completed.

And the delegates went, as I recall it, pledged to Mr. Garner, and after Roosevelt's name was placed in nomination, they switched to Roosevelt before the end[?] of the roll call.

G: I think that we're going to get on to the National Defense Aviation Board for Texas. Can you describe your role in working with the President to bring this about?

J: Yes, it was, as I recall, with the President's approval that I sought a meeting with Governor O'Daniel. Governor O'Daniel asked me to the Governor's Mansion. The Governor agreed to appoint the board and did appoint the board, and I think that it worked out very well.

G: Yes, now, Mr. President, in the 1941 Senate campaign, you announced your candidacy from the steps of the White House after a meeting with President Roosevelt. Can you describe this meeting that you had before your announcement with the President, and also throughout the campaign, how the Administration would assist you.

J: I think that there was some indication that the President was fearful of what might happen in a special election. President Roosevelt, I think, had some concern about the election of Congressman Martin Dies, and the Administration indicated to me that they would welcome my entry into the race. I finally concluded because of this I would enter the race, although I felt that it would be a very difficult uphill fight. I talked to the President about it. I could say that he certainly wasn't discouraging. When I left him, I told him that I was going to announce, and when I was asked by the reporters upon leaving the White House, I told them that I would be a candidate.

G: Did he promise you support during that meeting or anything of this nature?

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J: I think he made it clear that he would welcome my election. I thought that he wanted me to run very much, and that he thought that if Dies were elected, he would be a constant opponent to the Administration.

G: It has been said that he dissuaded Congressman Wright Patman from running so that you would have the opportunity.

J: I'm not informed of that. We did not expect that Gerald Mann would, but he didn't announce until later. It was very disheartening to us--the election was very close, just 1311 votes difference. Mann got many thousands that we would have gotten. I always thought that the Mann announcement was contributed to our defeat

G: Mr. President, during that 1941 campaign, can you describe some of the ways in which the Administration helped you, James Rowe issuing telegrams at crucial times?

J: I think they did everything that they thought they could appropriately do without offending the people of Texas by thinking that the President was trying to dictate to them. I think there was no question but what President Roosevelt and the people high up in his Administration preferred my platform and would have preferred my election to the election of Governor O'Daniel. The reason for that is because I supported the Administration and he opposed it. I think that they were very careful not to antagonize the people of Texas, or tried not to antagonize them, and I think they supported me every way they knew how appropriately.

G: Who was your key contact in the White House during that race?

J: Well, I had many good friends: Miss Tully, Jim Rowe--I don't remember whether Jimmy Roosevelt was there then or not, but if he did, he was friendly--Steve Early, Pa Watson; all of them were always good to me. Tommy Corcoran, Ben Cohen.

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G: Did Jesse Jones help you at all in that election?

J: Yes, I think that his paper endorsed me at the last stages of the campaign. I think that President Roosevelt had felt that he should have been more active than Mr. Jones chose to be.

G: Do you remember the telegram that President Roosevelt sent to Pappy O'Daniel, denying support for Governor O'Daniel's proposal for Texas to set up its own army and navy?

J: Yes.

G: Did the President talk to you after that campaign?

J: He could have. I don't recall. Oh, he could have, but I don't remember.

G: I supposed it was shortly after that election that the President would frequently rely on you for congressional tasks, such as the defense of Walter Winchell. Do you remember that?

J: Yes, he asked me to try to help out on occasion, and I always did.

G: How about this particular situation where Walter Winchell was supporting the President and the Naval Affairs Committee or members of that committee were going to investigate him?

J: I think that there was some report that Mr. Winchell was on reserve duty in a uniform and gave a broadcast, and the broadcast was criticized. I think that it was the whole question of whether a commentator should make a broadcast while in a Navy uniform. I think that we worked out some satisfactory solution to it at the President's request.

G: Did you talk to Congressman Vinson on that?

J: Yes.

G: Can you recall other similar instances where the President would get you to help?

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- J: Anytime the Administration had something that I could help on, I tried to do it. I was very fond of President Roosevelt, and I thought that he needed all the help he could get. I gave him all that I could give him. Sometimes it didn't amount to much. It might have even hurt him in some quarters, but I always enthusiastically and genuinely did my best.
- G: Now, can you recall some of your conferences with him in the White House? Any particulars of those interviews? How he would behave toward you? Any personal comments that he would have made that would be interesting?
- J: Yes, I always thought that he treated me like I was his son. And he acted just as attached to me as he would a member of his own family. He was very friendly with me, very warm with me, very stimulating, inspiring. And he would stimulate me to charge hell with a bucket of water and really believe I could put it out.
- G: Did he ever encourage you to seek higher office, say in the executive, or give you ideas of your own potential?
- J: Well, I think he approved. First, I think he approved of my campaign for Congress, and I think that he approved of my campaign for the Senate, and I think that he approved of my participation in the third term presidential campaign. And I think that he felt that I should return home when he ordered all of the congressmen back because he thought that their place was in the Congress. I think that he generally contributed everything he could to my development and my training and to my participation in the councils of government. I thought that it was unusual for a young man with my limited experience and my lack of knowledge of all of the intricacies of national and international politics to have the confidence and respect and affection of this man. It meant a great deal to me, and it still does.

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G: That's what the record shows--that he helped you in every conceivable way.

J: The President helped me. Mrs. Roosevelt helped me. All of the Roosevelt family helped me. I think that the country was saved by President Roosevelt. I think that all of his family helped him to do that, particularly Mrs. Roosevelt. I did all that I could, as long as he lived, to try to lift some of the burdens from his shoulders and help him any way that he could. I can't remember ever doing anything that I thought would cause him to be disappointed in me.

G: Can you recall any memorable statements that he made to you or something that has served as a point of inspiration, perhaps?

J: Oh, yes, many. On everything we talked, it was a memorable statement. I don't know anything that sums it up any better than to say that I always thought that I could go to him with any problem that I had and that he would help to find a solution. And I always thought that he was working for me and all the people of our country and trying to do the greatest good for the greatest number. And I think he did.

G: Now, can you describe your wartime mission to Australia and your subsequent conference with President Roosevelt at the White House?

J: Yes, they were having a lot of difficulty with divisions of the services there, and I joined with representatives of the army and the air force in making a very brief study of the army and navy and air force operations under General [Douglas] MacArthur's command. There was some discussion with the President about it. We made some recommendations about it, and he took them under consideration in his appointments of field commanders in that area. That's about all I think I can say about it.

G: Did he make any personal remarks on your trip, can you remember? President Roosevelt?

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J: I think he was pleased with it. He took the recommendations and acted upon them.

G: Well, is there anything else of interest that you might be able to tell me about President Roosevelt?

J: He was one of the most interesting men I ever knew, and, I think, one of the greatest public servants this country has had in all of its long and brilliant history.

G: I certainly do appreciate it, Mr. President.

End of Interview

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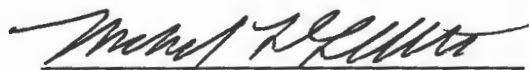
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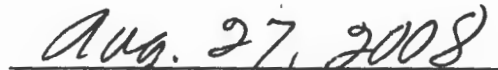
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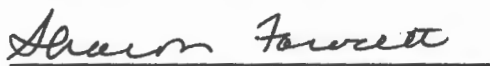
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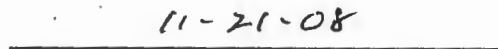
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