INTERVIEW I

DATE: November 19, 1968

INTERVIEWEE: LAWRENCE E. LEVINSON

INTERVIEWER: Paige E. Mulhollan

PLACE: Mr. Levinson's office, The White House, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

M: Let's first, just for the sake of the record here, identify you, Larry Levinson. Your position is special assistant to the President.

L: Deputy special counsel to the President is my title, as you can see from that commission.

M: Since what date?

L: I might give you a little bit of background on how I got to the White House staff. I came at the request of Joe Califano. Joe Califano and I were classmates at Harvard Law School and had worked together at the Pentagon in Secretary McNamara's office just prior to Joe coming over to the White House as a special assistant to the President.

I was on a vacation on a fairly remote lake in New York State when one afternoon in July somehow the White House operators got through up there, and it was Joe Califano at the other end of the line asking me whether I would mind coming down to Washington right away and consider coming over to the White House to give him a hand temporarily as he began his piecing together the domestic programs for the President. I then jumped into the car with my wife, and we came back to Washington. I spent some time talking to the then-Director of the Bureau of the Budget, Charlie Schultze, to find out a little bit about what I would be required to do.

Then began what started out as a temporary career in July or August of 1965, and it became so temporary, and I'm still here and will be here three and a half years come January 20. I came to the White House as an assistant to Joe Califano, and worked with him in the development in 1965 and 1966 and 1967 of the various legislative programs. In December of 1966 I was then denominated from a staff assistant type, I guess you would call it, to a deputy special assistant to the President with the presidential commission. And because I had a legal background, within a week some consideration was given to changing the title, not that titles mean much around the White House staff. But the title I had was then changed to deputy special counsel, recognizing the legal background and the fact that that title would be more meaningful in the nature of the work that I would be performing. I have been deputy special counsel since that time.

M: This could be an endless thing, but can you describe how under President Johnson the staff operation has generally been organized, particularly on the domestic side, on the Califano side?

L: Yes, I think the one great change that occurred in the Johnson Administration as compared to prior White House staffs and administrations is that under the Johnson Administration the preparation of the domestic legislative program was done far more systematically and far more comprehensively from the White House. In previous administrations I believe the practice was to rely very heavily on the agencies and departments for ideas which would then be staffed through the Bureau of the Budget and then come up to the White House staff.

M: In more or less finished form.

L: In more or less finished form, for presentation to the President. In our time and in our stay at the White House, that process tended to operate a little bit differently, with the main impetus instead of coming from down to up, went from up to down, where we had at the White House staff a better overview, we thought, of the country's needs.

(Interruption)

M: You were talking about the legislative drafting by the staff.

L: We believed that with the general overview of the economy and the nation's problems that we had at the White House staff which tended to transcend any particular view of an agency that we would be in a better position of trying to serve the country's needs by directing the programs from top to bottom where they would come up to the top again rather than have the ideas generally percolate up from the agencies to the Bureau of the Budget and then to the White House. This may be a somewhat oversimplified view of it. It may not quite have happened that way, but in general the thrust was, I think, as I have described. In addition, the practice of having the White House domestic staff get into the formulation of domestic programs across the board also enabled the President, who we work in close contact with, to give us, on a day-to-day basis or on a week-to-week basis during the time that the legislative process was maturing, his ideas and his concepts of where he wanted the direction of the program to center on.

I recall, for example, that when we got here in August of 1965 that around September of 1965, the next month, the President was very concerned with the problems of the American city and wanted to place heavy emphasis on a program for the problems of the American city. He was also very concerned about the transportation snarl in the

country and wanted to rationalize the government organization and policy-making machinery for transportation. I cite those as two examples where the President had an interest in two fields and then transmitted that interest down to us so that we could better formulate the program and handle the legislative priorities.

M: Was there a conscious attempt to duplicate on the domestic side a sort of Rostow operation such as has occurred in the national security side?

L: I don't believe that that was the model for our particular structure. I might tell you that we started out with Joe Califano and I alone the first year.

M: I wanted to ask you about the personnel and how they all fit in here.

L: Right. We found that the job of programming a program which later would result in somewhat of the nature of forty or fifty messages with something on the order of a hundred and fifty legislative proposals all compressed into the months of September, October, November, December, and January, plus the message-writing season which ran into February and March was an enormous job for two people. We relied very heavily on the staff of the Bureau of the Budget at that time which then in effect became an adjunct of our office, particularly the office of legislative reference, which was then headed by Assistant Director Sam Hughes, who later became deputy director of the budget.

From that first year's experience we found that we could not as a matter of either the physical burden of it or the care which must be exercised in the preparation of these programs do it ourselves. Then we began to consciously, with the President's approval, enlarge this domestic programming staff to the point where we first added Jim Gaither, who was a lawyer at the Justice Department and who was brought to our attention by

John Douglas, who was then the assistant attorney general of the civil division on whom we had relied upon heavily in matters affecting pricing and economic issues. John recommended Jim Gaither, whose father incidentally was the author of the Gaither Report of the Eisenhower years, the report dealing with national security. Jim was added to our staff in August of 1966, I believe, dealing primarily in the poverty area and in the health, education, and welfare area. We then added in time Fred Bohen, who was an assistant dean of the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, to work on the District of Columbia and to formulate the housing program.

M: The people who were added then, and I want you to go on with them, but these are generally specialists that you are adding?

L: No. I might say that none of the people that we hired had any particular background in the subject matter for which they were assigned to work, just as Joe Califano and I [did not]. When we came here our world was limited by the umbrella of the Pentagon, which is a wide world in itself but hardly as wide as when you set out into the open seas of the federal government at large. Neither Joe nor I had any training as such in the arts of programming for the cities or for OEO or for HEW. It was something that we learned as we got immersed into it. And very much the same thing was the case for the people that we added to our staff. No one was really an expert in any particular field. We looked upon ourselves as relevant generalists, generalists that could ask the right kind of questions of the experts, but were not encumbered by particularly agency views or biases that would try to think of the programs in the broadest possible terms of presidential interest rather than agency or narrow interests and who were youthful enough to bear the

punishing burden of working very long hours over sustained periods of time meeting very tight deadlines.

Fred Bohen, as I mentioned to you, was an assistant dean at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, whose *forté* was government organization, the political process. To that extent knowing the process helped him, I believe, in getting around the agencies. Fred first came to us and worked for about eight months as the executive director of a task force headed by Ben Heineman of Northwest Industries dealing with the organization of the federal government. And within an eight to ten-week period Fred put together with the commission's support and through a commission a blueprint for modernizing the federal government for the next twenty-five years.

M: Of which nothing has since been heard, has it, as far as implementation?

L: There have been some items dealing with matters that the President could take care of administratively that had been done, notably the greater consolidation of regional offices of the major departments to help serve the public better. But like so many things when you are dealing with the blueprint of the government twenty-five years hence, you had laid down the idea now and the time will come in time for those ideas to be considered and proposed. Like so many things in the government, particularly when organization is involved, there is always a long time period between the proposal and the action. Things sort of hatch and get warm and ripen, but the seeds have been planted through this by this very thorough study of the operations of the federal government which call for some very fundamental reforms, both in the domestic area and in the foreign area.

You recall that the Department of Transportation was seriously proposed back in the thirties and received added impetus through the Hoover Commission and by President Eisenhower. It wasn't until 1965 that, many years after the initial thought was laid down, the Department of Transportation became a reality. I would say very much the same thing happened to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. It was a process of evolution and change which led to the enactment of the Housing and Urban Development Department in 1965.

M: Is there any means for assuring that the ideas of the Heineman Report will be kept before the succeeding administrations, for example?

L: Yes, this could be done in a number of ways. It could be done in the form of lectures by the President when he leaves office. It could be done in the form of proposals he may be desirous of making in his State of the Union Message. It may be done in many, many ways that will provide outlets for the consideration of those problems.

We then added to our staff Matthew Nimetz who, hearing about the growing operation here and who was at that time clerking for Justice Harlan of the Supreme Court, wrote out of the blind one day a letter to us expressing an interest in joining the White House staff and indicating that he had a somewhat unusual record of being first in his class at Harvard as an undergraduate and first in his class at Harvard in the law school and had taken a post-graduate course at Oxford University.

M: Pretty good academic credentials.

L: Yes, and clerked for Justice Harlan--was clerking for Justice Harlan at the time. So I think Joe Califano, who remembered that he had gotten into the government through a

letter that he wrote out of the blind to Cyrus Vance in 1960 after the Kennedy victory, somehow felt a strand out of his own past coming to the fore when out of the blind a letter from Matthew Nimetz arrived. We interviewed Matt and later, with the approval of the President, added Matt to our staff and assigned Matt, because of his experience in legal background, to work in the area of civil rights and the area of crime control.

Then as we went along, we got more heavily involved in the issues of wages and prices and government stockpiles and the economy generally because the President looked to our operation not only to sustain and support the legislative program but also to handle the day-to-day crises that fall on the White House in the domestic area. So to handle and to work closely with the Council of Economic Advisers and the Bureau of the Budget and the Treasury Department and the General Services Administration, we brought into the fold John Robson, first who was a classmate of Joe's and mine at Harvard Law School and who was a practicing lawyer in Chicago and a member of an eminent Chicago law firm, to work as a consultant to the Bureau of the Budget although he was in fact working on our staff. That's where he simply was placed for payroll purposes.

M: I was going to ask--these people that you are adding now, are they being added on a presidential budget for this, or are they added to some agency and detailed over here?

L: No, they are actually added--placed on the agency payroll and then assigned here. We are dealing, as you know, with a handful of people. John Robson then worked with us on all of the various pricing matters and matters affecting strikes and the economy. And when the Transportation Department was formed John was the ideal choice of the

President to become its first general counsel. When John left our economy side of our group, we brought in from New York Stanford G. Ross, who was a professor of international tax transactions at New York University and who had been at Harvard Law School the year before Joe and I--

M: There is a good case for an Establishment here, capital E, based on the Harvard Law School.

L: --to take over the domestic economy part of our operation and to work with us on these things. So then with the hiring of Stan Ross to replace John Robson, our staff remained as follows: with Joe Califano and myself handling general matters, that is, handling the entire range of matters; with Matt Nimetz handling the civil rights and crime and conservation programs.

(Interruption)

M: You were detailing what you ended up with. You ended up with Califano and yourself and four others, is that right?

L: Four people that worked with us. As I say, we divided the government up so that we would be able to monitor the major activities of each of the agencies, both in the development of the program and in the evaluation and follow-through to programs that were enacted, where there were trouble spots. For example, model cities being one. So that in our division of the domestic sphere of government, we assigned Matt Nimetz, as I said, to work on civil rights, crime and conservation. We assigned Stanford Ross to work on the economy which then included the Treasury Department and the Transportation Department. Jim Gaither worked with the domestic social agencies including HEW,

OEO, the Labor Department. Fred Bohen worked primarily with HUD and then when Stephen Pollak left after the District of Columbia reorganization plan was passed giving the District of Columbia a mayor and a city council, the White House end of that work fell to Fred Bohen as well.

M: You don't consider the people around here who write speeches and things, they are not part of Califano's immediate--

L: No, but I might describe for you a moment how the process of working with the speech writers devolved. In the preparation of messages we would lay out a timetable and a schedule for drafts of messages to the Congress. The primary responsibility would be placed on the agency. We found, however, that agency drafts, while somewhat helpful, were by no means the final product in that by far and large since programs have to cut across multi-agency lines, for example, in dealing with manpower, we were dealing with programs of the Labor Department and the Office of Economic Opportunity, so that it would be very difficult to have one of the agencies draft a message covering the whole manpower area. In a sense the message writing was a consequence of the way the government was organized. In dealing with the cities problem, there were parts that related to transportation. We would try to divide up the parts, for example, in the cities message, giving parts to HUD, giving parts to Transportation.

When we received the drafts, I would say almost every one of the cases except some of the early drafts that we received from the Justice Department on crime and on civil rights when they had one of the top speech writers at Justice, a fellow named Jack Rosenthal, but aside from that experience with the Justice Department we were virtually

left to our own resources here to do the messages over again in their entirety and to restructure those messages. And ordinarily what would happen would be that those of the staff who are primarily responsible for the subject matter would work with the speech writers combining the substance of the program with the literary elegance that was befitting of a state paper such as a message.

I recall that I had myself worked on very many messages with Harry Middleton where I would have an agency draft in hand and an outline of the program. We would then spend perhaps a day thinking about the organization and structure of the message. We would then spend the next day in writing messages. After a while, we became quite facile at message writing, and could turn out a fairly complicated message, let's say, in two or three days. At first it took us a little longer. After the message was completed in draft, we would then circulate those messages to all of the interested agencies and ask for comments written on the message by sometime at the close of business the same day. We would then compile the comments, make our judgments as to which comments we should accept or reject.

M: This is the first time you have mentioned a policy role for the staff. You've still been relying on the agency's suggestions for the message. Where did the policy action by the staff--

L: I may have run a little ahead of myself a little bit when you asked the question, how did we relate to the speech writers. The program was basically formulated by the President based on alternatives that we presented to him in December.

M: "We" meaning the staff here?

L: The staff here. We then would go back to the agencies and to the agency heads telling them that, for example, in the cities we wanted programs dealing with home ownership, with new experimental ways to construct low-cost houses, with methods to bring down the rental of apartments built for moderate-income families through greater subsidies of the government. The agencies had been involved to some large extent in the preparation of these ideas either serving on task forces that were responsible for those ideas or having observers in on task forces when the task forces were composed of people from the outside. So when the agencies received word to proceed sometime in December, they were fairly keyed or clued in to what it was that was required. The question was, to what extent should they proceed, to what extent should they not proceed? So with the deadlines given to the agencies, the drafts of messages with the ideas came up from the agencies but they underwent substantial and major rewriting, so that I would say that there was really no relationship between the prose of the agency message and the prose that finally emerged when the message went up to the Congress.

The President sought in each of his messages to leave behind a rather enduring picture of what the problems were, what the attempts were at solving those problems over the course of our country's history, and what he had proposed for the future. And if you look at the messages, they all contain the same type of internal structure and logic to them which I think are the interesting keys to those messages when we were sending up forty to fifty messages a legislative session. As I say, the speech writers worked with us as a team where we would blend together the substantive knowledge of the program with the writing ability of the writer to produce we think an excellent paper on the subject. In

some instances, one person was able to combine the literary elegance and the substantive content of the program--notably Harry McPherson. In other cases, we worked as a team with the writers in developing the messages.

M: What happened when the agencies sent back up programs that were essentially incompatible or at variance? Where was that difference resolved?

L: The difference was resolved in the writing of the message. The messages themselves tended to be issue-raising devices where if decisions hadn't been made firmly in the course and process of writing the message, hurried and climatic negotiations would take place to try to resolve the issues that we had not been able to spot in the whole course of the process. And when I say "hurried," I do not mean to imply by that wasteful or careless. I mean to say that decisions had to come much more quickly. Sometimes you find that you do better when you operate against a tight deadline. It forces you to think that you do better when you operate against a tight deadline. It forces you to think of the alternatives and not to procrastinate and to come to grips with the issues as promptly as possible, which is a great advantage in a large government.

M: What does the staff do in reconciling these differences? Do you bring the agency people together over here for a discussion?

L: Yes, in all cases, I believe, where there are serious disagreements between the White House position and the agency position, attempts were made to work out positions with the cabinet secretary involved. I remember that this was particularly true in the area of housing and to larger and I should say to a lesser extent in the area of health, education, and welfare, where if there were disagreements as to how far a program should go--I

might say that the essential nature of these disagreements was not so much on the content of the program but on the scope and breadth of the program where we were inclined to go for as broad a program as we could where the agencies who might somehow have their views tampered by operational necessities tended to go for a narrower view of the program. So I think in all instances we have tried to reconcile the differences because obviously when the items got to the Hill, the agencies themselves would be leading the fight with the cabinet secretaries who would have to testify about them.

M: At what point did the President get called in, if ever, in this process before the final result?

L: Where I believe there were irreconcilable differences that the President himself would have to decide the issue. One of the things I think we served him best at was getting people around the table and trying to reduce to the smallest possible extent the kinds of tearing issues that the President would have to be deciding. I believe that our process of around-the-table consultation and I believe that anybody looking at the records of meetings in the White House during the process of the formulation of a program would be bewildered and amazed to see how meetings would--for example, we would go from nine to twelve on conservation; we would go from one to four on health on older Americans; we would go from seven to ten on transportation. We would then come back the next day and the day after with follow-outs of those meetings with issues that we could not solve in those meetings. So when you are dealing, as I say, with a very large program involving at least a hundred pieces of legislation a year, all of which are complicated, all of which are large, to have the President in on every [decision], umpiring

every decision, would just about consume every waking moment. So one of the things that we did in addition to generating the ideas was to try to reconcile the differences where they occurred. In cases where differences were so personal and irreconcilable, we would have to take those questions to the President.

In many instances, in the drafting of the messages, those issues could be raised with a little paper that we would send to the President saying, "Here is your message on jobs. The remaining issue is whether we should go for five hundred thousand jobs by 1971 or two hundred and fifty thousand jobs. Secretary Wirtz thinks we ought to do two fifty. Henry Ford thinks we can do five hundred. Wirtz requests that we bring this matter to your attention to present his views. Which do you prefer?" Give then the President the choice. So there are many ways of bringing the few irreconcilable issues to his attention.

M: How far generally did the President give authority to Califano or yourself to make decisions that involve basic compromise issues in this regard?

L: I think we were given the latitude that was necessary in the given case. The final responsibility, obviously, on the shape of programs must rest with the President, but we, I believe, had an adequate measure of authority to deal with those issues as they arose. Otherwise, to take everything to the President in the context of forty messages plus a hundred legislative items would be very difficult. I might also say that the role of the Bureau of the Budget in this process was very helpful. The Bureau of the Budget plays a role of umpire. By the time we get a disagreement they have either been rationalized or worked out in the agency by the competing interests and by the secretary. If they are not

resolved within the agency, then they may be resolved within the Bureau of the Budget. If they are not resolved as a result of the Bureau of the Budget review of the issue, we would get into the problem. If they are not resolved as a result of our attempts at reconciliation in those few instances they would go up to the President.

So there is a process of settlement of issues throughout the government that is built into the legislative process which goes through various levels of government. I believe the issue-resolving role played by the domestic staff under President Johnson was probably much greater than ever before in the recent decades. We always took as our framework of reference the idea to move forward as much as we could consistent with the sound infrastructure, you know, that accompanies a program. And we would be more inclined, would think, to go for the bigger and the more expansive than we would be for a smaller and the less risk-taking aspect of it only because we felt that we had the opportunity to do a lot of innovation and we had the time in the sense of the opportunity for bill passage to set out to do bigger things. So we always, I think, would play for the bigger stakes rather than the smaller stakes.

M: What was the response more in the other direction of the agencies to this kind of staff operation? Did you run into obstructionism or resistance on their part to this type of operation as opposed to what had been done previously?

L: It would be very difficult to compare the agency reaction to what had been done previously. It may have been that the Bureau of the Budget exercised somewhat of that function in the normal budget examination and issue-resolving process that continually goes on across the street. But I would say in the area of Health, Education, and Welfare,

I believe we worked out an excellent working relationship. In the area of OEO with Sarge Shriver and later with Bert Harding, I believe we worked out an excellent working relationship. In the area of Housing and Urban Development, naturally there was a concern that a newly organized department should not undertake such far-ranging responsibilities until its own house was put in order, and I believe that we tended on that principle or point of philosophy to disagree more with housing people that we did, say, with some other agencies where we would tend to try to go for the bigger programs while the department was being organized. I believe our greatest difficulty came with the Labor Department and with the personality problems that we faced dealing with Secretary Wirtz.

M: This was a matter not of principle or of program but just of resentment in the way things were done. Is that what you mean?

L: Well, I don't know whether resentment is quite the word for it. I believe there was some belief and feeling that somehow the presence of the staff here may have tended to block the access of a cabinet officer to the President. I think the answer to that is that the President has said time and again that anytime a cabinet officer desires to raise an issue with him, the President's door is always open. I believe that remained the principle of the Johnson Administration throughout. It was difficult for me to evaluate these complaints but there was no question about the fact that we did get involved not only in terms of programs but in terms of substantive issues to a much greater depth in agency operations in the operations of the agency than ever before.

M: You anticipate all my questions. That was the next one. In dealing with an agency, now, take any of them--Commerce--the staff here dealt with various levels in the Commerce Department, I take it, down below the secretary level.

L: I might tell you a little bit about what our [inaudible] system looks like because that will be the key. By and large, most of the contacts that we had with the agencies were either through the secretary or the under secretary or through a special assistant to the secretary. At times it might have been necessary to deal with an assistant secretary or people of the operational branches. I think those times were most rare and remote. But our fundamental dealings were with the secretary, the under secretary--that is, the presidential appointees--but on occasion we were involved in much greater depth levels than that.

A case in point comes to mind which may tend to illustrate what I have been talking about. In the formulation of our housing program, we noticed that the housing construction starts for low-income families, that is, in units that the government subsidizes, were running at a rate of about thirty-five thousand a year. Based on our forecasts of needs, that rate would have to be increased from thirty-five thousand to six hundred thousand, roughly, a year. The getting from thirty-five thousand to six hundred thousand is going to be an enormous challenge that will require the cooperation of many people, many sectors of the economy, and large financial resources which the Congress will have to appropriate.

But the subdivision or division of the Department of Housing and Urban Development that had been largely involved in the low-income housing program or the

so-called public housing program as we know it was something called the HAA, which stood for the Housing Assistance Administration, which was the division of the bureaucracy which really grew up with the first public housing programs in the late 1930s where the staff got to be virtually frozen and stayed pretty much throughout the fifties and early sixties. We did something, I believe, that was quite unprecedented in the annals of the White House. We invited every member of the HAA at HUD, professional government employees, people who had been with the government twenty, twenty-five years, to the White House and told them good morning, that they were sitting in the most important spot of government, they really held the key to the housing problems of this country, and to a large extent to the urban crisis that we faced, and that their cooperation and their involvement and their enthusiasm was most deeply desired and appreciated. Based on going directly into a group of about thirty or forty bureaucrats and bringing them over to the White House where we really did get under the layers of bureaucracy at Housing and finally got the people who were the people who processed the various applications for public housing in this country.

M: But you don't get any kind of chain of command difficulties doing that?

L: No, we in all cases try to say that this is consistent with the progress of the agency and with the programs of the administration. I suppose that if I were secretary of the department and found that forty of my people were going over to the White House for a lecture on how to be more enthusiastic and how to be more responsible, I might be somewhat concerned, but that is to give you an illustration that we did deal with the operational people when the need arose.

M: Did the President, for example, in a case like you mentioned by way of example, cooperate to the extent of coming in and adding a few words to this type of. . . . ?

L: I do not recall whether in that instance the President did come in, but the fact that these people had come to the White House for the first time in all of their government careers was something that was a remarkable event in their lives and their response, I believe, since that time has been rewarding to the extent that we have now moved--I do not, obviously, say that it was because of the meeting at the White House--but many other things were done, and we then moved from thirty-five thousand to--we doubled that figure in 1967 to go up to seventy thousand with the same bureaucracy, with the same great attention that was paid to the problem by the White House and by our staff.

M: That's an example of how the White House mystique works. You mentioned earlier the difficulties of being a staff member, the long hours and so on. Is that what motivates the staff by and large--the mystique of the man who happens to be president, or the mystique of being in the White House, the center of power?

L: I suppose that if you look back at the history of this country and you note that we have had now thirty-six presidents and we will be getting the thirty-seventh soon, that the personal staffs around those presidents probably never numbered any more than ten, at the very most fifteen, and I'm sure much less than that in the earlier days of our history. But taking a factor of ten as an example, multiply ten times thirty-six and you have in the course of almost two hundred years of American history about three hundred men who were close and working in the White House on matters of great substance. If you consider yourself that you were one of those three hundred lucky men given the

unparalleled opportunity to do things--I always reflect on that, but I do feel that I was one of the three hundred or so that have served presidents--then you have an opportunity for enormous good for the nation in trying to help solve some of those enormous problems that confront the nation. You are in a position to do more about it in the White House than almost any other place one could find themselves.

It's knowing that you have the power with a responsive president who wants to break new ground and wants to create and innovate and try to solve the very difficult problems that we now face with a nation that is exceedingly prosperous, which makes all of the underlying problems that we let go along for so long more intolerable to bear. Given that opportunity at this phase of one's life you have to regard it as a stunning and awesome opportunity which must be exercised to its fullest. So, somehow while you might complain about the hours and the deprivation of personal family life, you still are working for a mighty cause which tends to make all of it worthwhile.

The fact is that you can sitting here with a flick of a finger on the telephone do an awful lot--get a housing project started that has slowed down, begin some test programs, find out how things are going, where the troubles are. [It] makes the life a most rewarding and interesting life. I do believe that after a while freshness and the innovation tends to wear down. I was somewhat concerned as we progressed through our third year that we became more institutionalized. We might have become more conservative in the sense that we weren't willing to move as fast as perhaps fresh people would want to move. So I think like anything else when you're dealing on the cutting edge of

innovation, if you have been there too long, even at the White House, you tend not to be as productive as you might otherwise could be.

So I believe that while three and a half years would be a demarcation line for us by necessity on January 20, that is about I would think the farthest reach of tenure at the White House. I think beyond that you tend to get too set in your ways and you tend to become more of an institution, more of an institution unto itself. I think that an overturn or recycling--there are men of enormous talents and abilities who could serve in these kinds of jobs. As I did mention to Joe Califano, I thought that the one reflection I took away with me from the last set of programs we did, and this was entirely independent I think of any other constraints like the budget, was that we do tend to get a little more wary, a little more conservative, a little more not willing to take--to go as far as we might have gone two years ago simply by the nature of having been there and seeing it.

M: Does another thing happen, too, I was wondering about when you were describing the background of the people who have been on your team. All of you seem to be rather homogenous in background and training and so on. How do you keep from developing a unanimity of viewpoint that deprives the President of alternatives?

L: I think the answer to that is that we are not homogenous in our own viewpoints, that is, we all have our different philosophies of how to approach problems and I don't believe we get conformity. As a matter of fact, we get rather healthy diversity in our staff which I think is--I cannot for the moment think of specific examples where we might have had disagreements within the staff and one view prevailed. But I think there are enough of us that are intellectually honest and with at least some framework and points of reference

about things that we do have our disagreements which of course we can resolve--we hope we can resolve. You also have to remember that the process is much more complicated and zigzaggy than one would ever suspect. It never works in the sense of rather clearly defined objectives inexorably being rolled to that point by a series of things. The whole operation is one of zigs and zags and decisions and then reversions and then reversals and then other decisions made and so forth. It's a very difficult process to describe unless you have been in it, at least to appreciate it unless you have been in it. But I think that given a very excellent mix of idea formulations to begin with--that is, in that task forces that we've set up, we have a lot of disciplines crossing and meshing against each other where you get a lot of diversity of opinion there. You have that room for disagreement and that room for the way ideas are shaped. When the task forces report, then we sit around a table--a lot of us that have our own viewpoints--and then the ideas then tend to get tempered and to shape by that. When they've been presented to the President, he may bring his own viewpoint to the fore, so they tend to get tempered and shaped by that. There are many points along the way where the ideas are shaped and forged and tempered and changed by men of different attitudes and different beliefs.

M: Not attempting to put anybody on the spot, but how with the bunch like you have of highly able, young, vigorous, ambitious types working together over three and a half year period within a few feet of each other, do you avoid intra-staff squabbles of a serious nature?

L: Well, let me say this. I believe that within our own staff we have not had any serious disagreements. I don't think that is born of a sense of conformity. It is born of a sense

that we like each other, we relate to each other, we do feel that cooperation is extremely necessary. Now I must say in all candor that this particular operation that we had may have from time to time caused certain resentment on the part of other staff members. I suppose that when you see things charging along the way they have, we may have in the course of our operation here maybe not consciously gotten some people upset who felt that--

M: Other staff people?

L: Other staff people, yes. I think that comes from part of the abrasion of working on a staff for a President who likes to have competition among people on his staff. He may throw a problem at Milt Semer in Housing, for example, when he was here, and also give us the problem. When we did not agree, somehow we always end up on top. Now, I don't know why, and this may have caused Milt to be a little bit resentful of it. Somebody has to win, somebody has to lose in these processes.

(Interruption)

M: You introduced the next topic I had in mind partially a while ago in mentioning the kind of president Mr. Johnson has been in regard to his staff. This calls, I'm sure, for a lot of subjective estimation on your part, but what kind of man is Mr. Johnson to work for?

L: Well, Mr. Johnson is many things. I should say the President is many things. First, and probably unknown to most people, the President happens to have an excellent ear, an excellent eye for prose. I would say that in our relations, my relationships with the President, in the writing of messages, in preparation of other letters to the Congress and other things, that the President would make the one change or would make the one

addition that would always get the top quote. I would say that the President has a knack of appreciating when something is good and something is not good, obviously turning it back when it is not good, but also being a very fine editor. I would hope that all of the drafts of the messages that have been retained in the files which show his comments on the messages and his changes within the messages would point up the fact that the President does have a very acute sense of the language in the sense of style and prose. Second is that the President, I think, next to Secretary McNamara, had the most phenomenal grasp of numbers of a problem, that the President would be able to pull numbers out and make sense.

(Interruption)

Let me finish now, at least at this session, my view of the President where I have indicated that I thought, one, his talent for the right line at the right place was unsurpassed. And the fact, number two, that he had a very good analytical grasp of the issues, of numbers. I think the President would probably have made one of the country's best lawyers in the terms of being able to present positions with great clarity and as a skilled advocate would. The President did not have legal training, but he uses many of the same techniques as a lawyer. He can marshal his arguments, he can see objectives clearly, he can bring issues down that are fairly complicated to very simple terms. His explanation, for example, of the very complicated case for the tax increase should serve to point that out where in his chalk talk to the press on the blackboard, he outlined what the problem was--that his $25 billion deficit was intolerable, that the choices then were either to borrow most of that deficit, to borrow against most of that deficit which would

have caused a skyrocketing of interest rates because the government would then be going out on the market to borrow this money competing with all other sources of credit and dominating the credit market which would be unconscionable to do, which would stop home building in its tracks, or to tax for a good part of the $25 billion which meant a tax increase of something like the order of 25 per cent which would be unconscionable as well as unrealistic at that time; or to reduce government spending by that amount which would have taken a catastrophic toll on all of the social welfare programs which were within the area of the budget the President could control.

So given the fact that you could not tax it all or borrow it all or reduce expenditure to cover it all, beginning with that rather simple explanation, the President then said that what he would propose to do is to tax some, to reduce expenditures some, and to borrow some. [He said] the way he would get the deficit down to manageable proportions would be first to impose a temporary 10 per cent surcharge which would yield $10 billion. The $10 billion would then offset the $25 billion which would bring the deficit down to $15 billion, to then reduce and take actions to control government expenditures by deferring and stretching out less essential projects which might knock another $3 billion down which would then bring it down to approximately $12 billion, and by effecting other economies he would hope to get the deficit down to on the range of $10 to $9 billion. So you would then by a combination of taxing, borrowing, and reducing and curtailing expenditures manage to control a deficit. Now, all of this was presented with startling clarity, and while men had labored many, many months to try to define the issues, the President presented the case in that way.

The other aspect of the President, I must say, is his desire to help the underprivileged of this country. I do not believe that I have ever seen in any person a [greater] streak of genuine desire to help. For example, the older people of America in connection with, for example, the building of a nursing home and senior citizens center in Austin, Texas, which would give you a clear example. He asked, "Why can't old people be able to sit out on their porches at the end of the day and have a nice view of the city and have a nice view of the river? This shouldn't be something that should be the privilege of the rich. All people ought to enjoy it. They have worked hard all their lives and still haven't been able to save enough money to live decently. Then in some way the government ought to help to make the declining years a year of a little more grace and dignity for the elderly." So he could justify acquiring a piece of prime property in Austin which happened to be surplus government property, of fish hatcheries, and moving the fish elsewhere and building a senior citizens' project so that the elderly would be able to sit out and enjoy the declining years, the right of looking at a good sunset, if you will. I believe that that streak has manifested itself over and over again in the kinds of things that laid the foundation for the programs like Medicare and for the cities and for all the other social gains of the past several years.

I think the President appreciated, although maybe not having known poverty personally, having grown up in an area where there was enormous poverty, a hard scrabble country where the water was scarce and the dust was plentiful, and could understand how an enlightened government could help. I believe he carried with him many of the strong ideals of FDR in showing that it should take national government

action in view of state inaction and inaction of other parts of the national scene to take up that slack and to move forward to do these things. I think his philosophy of federal action where the federal government did not necessarily have to dominate but could stimulate, could provide the funds, could provide the background and the means to innovate, were all important parts of his makeup which made it for us in the domestic planning side of the house a great pleasure to work with him, because he is of that temperament and that mind to move forward.

M: What about the personal aspects? Did he have high periods on Levinson and low periods on Levinson that made it difficult at times?

L: The President again is very complex. He is a sensitive human being. I believe that he felt that at times we were talking to the press too much, that we should have maintained as Louis Brownlow once said, or Louis Howe, I guess, whoever did it, that White House aides ought to maintain a passion for anonymity. I think our major problems with the President were when he saw names in print, when he found that we were talking to reporters. I might say that none of this was done--I don't want to exude self-justification now, but I would say that our function in talking to the press was really to try to help tell the story of his programs.

End of Tape 1 of I and Interview I

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