

## INTERVIEW V

DATE: November 5, 1971

INTERVIEWEE: LAWRENCE E. LEVINSON

INTERVIEWER: Joe B. Frantz

PLACE: Mr. Levinson's office, New York City

Tape 1 of 1

F: Larry, we haven't in previous interviews said much on the personal side. We've been strictly programmatic, you might say, and so let's move from there and talk a little bit. You're an astute observer with a reportorial eye. I'm going to turn it over to you for just some of the things that you have observed.

L: Joe, I appreciate that, and I might begin with an anecdote. I'm sitting here at Gulf and Western, and we're overlooking a good part of New York City on a beautiful fall day. The story really of how I got to Gulf and Western and how the President figured in my migration from Washington to New York I think would be very illuminating. So let me begin and preface this by not beginning at the beginning but starting at the end, if I may.

When the President announced his decision in late March not to run again, naturally members of the White House staff began to look to their own personal lives to decide what they wanted to do, very much as the President himself had in mind, come January next, that he was going to be going down to Texas. So we all assembled among ourselves in the days that followed March 31 to decide to sort out our own personal lives. And we had certainly come through a fantastic adventure at an early age, which for some of us will never be duplicated, and in a sense has spoiled a lot of us, too, in terms of the

Levinson -- V -- 2

awareness of the kinds of things we were capable of doing and did do. So we all began to think about what we were going to do. Jim Gaither, who was in our little group, really was torn by either going back to practice law in California, or maybe staying around and working up on the Hill for a while.

F: Have you seen Jim out there?

L: I've talked to him on the phone.

F: Well, he's got a view like yours. The two of you did wind up with that. He overlooks the Bay, you know.

L: Right. We have another view, which I'll show you later, on the other side, and I unfortunately can't span both walls here.

My first preference, I would say, would have been to get out of Washington, to return to private life, either in the practice of law or using some of the skills that I had gathered in the White House, to work for a corporation. In sorting out these opportunities, I happened to mention to Jack Valenti one day, "Jack, if you have any ideas about what I ought to do, let me know. I appreciate the value of your judgment."

And not long after that, Jack came back to me and said, "Larry, there's a terrific new company. It is very new. There are a lot of young, aggressive fellows in it that maybe could use your kind of background. I want to set you up in New York to go see Charlie Bluhdorn, who's the chairman of the board of Gulf and Western, and see whether you like him. I sent him a nice letter about you and he said he'd be interested in meeting you." Well, I, among other things, did that. I went up to New York and I spent some time with Mr. Bluhdorn and then came back to Washington.

Levinson -- V -- 3

While all this was going on, the President was hinting to me, in ways that I didn't perceive, that when he went back to Austin it would be very nice if he had some fellow from the East to be down there with all the other fellows and show that the Library or the School would not really have a Texas quality but would have a national quality, and that I had lived through the exciting days of the domestic program and maybe knew how to write a fair amount of things. I think he was hinting at me in the conversations that I had about what we were going to do, "You know, I really could use a fellow like you down in Texas."

F: You're being somewhere between innocent and obtuse?

L: Right. I must say it first came to me one morning in the bedroom when Joe and I walked in, and we were either going over some legislative proposals which he was going to send up as a farewell, which we had started to germinate around August and September. I remember the President sitting up at the edge of his bed. It must have been about eight-thirty in the morning, and a television commercial was on, and at that moment the American Cancer Society was doing that excellent commercial on cigarette roulette, "You're taking a gamble when you smoke a cigarette." He was kind of looking at that with one eye and looking at me with another eye. I was kind of caught between the two eyes and he said, "You know, you and Joe Califano have done a tremendous service for me. I haven't really been able to, in my own way, thank you enough for it, but you've been tremendous sources of strength with all these programs domestically, and if there's anything I can do in the future to help you fellows get along, you know that I'm here as your friend." I took that as a wonderful compliment.

Levinson -- V -- 4

Then immediately after that he said, "And you, Larry, you particularly have certain skills in writing and memory and things like that." This was the first hint I got that he was looking at me to play some role in the development of either the Library or the School of Public Affairs or just generally be of help to him down there. And it kind of went over my head.

I said, "Well, Mr. President, one thing I've been very interested in is if I were to stay in the government I would very much like to be on one of the regulatory commissions. I'm a lawyer by background and I'm very interested in transportation. I helped you develop with one of our task forces the Transportation Department, and golly, it would be just great to stay on here and maybe go on the ICC." And he made a note of that. I never heard anything about the ICC after that meeting, except one afternoon, maybe within two weeks, I saw Senator [Warren] Magnuson, who is chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, going up to see the President. And I in my own sense of wishfulness felt, could it be the way this President operated, is he getting Maggie up to talk to him about possibly proposing me for the ICC? There was a vacancy at that point. At that juncture Irv Sprague was also very much under consideration for the FDIC and eventually as you know was appointed to the FDIC. All this also took place while the Fortas thing was brewing around.

Strangely enough, within about two days after the moment that I saw Maggie walk by up to the President's office, I got a call from Mike Pertschuk, who was the general counsel of the Commerce Committee, who started to talk a little bit about me

Levinson -- V -- 5

going on the ICC. I said, "Well, this is really something." In the meantime I was discussing employment with Gulf and Western.

Finally it resolved itself into something like this: the President called me into his little Green Room. I think this was right about the time that General [Creighton] Abrams had come up to discuss the bombing halt. I can't remember precisely the time of this. It was at the end of an exhausting day for the President. It was about seven-thirty or a quarter to eight at night, and he and I sat very quietly. His eyes were red-rimmed. I remember that. He had been under a tremendous strain, tremendous pressure. The Filipino mess boy who comes out invisibly by magic, appears out of that little galley that was set up. "Larry," the President said, "would you like a drink?" This was the first time really. Every time we discussed things we had always been on a professional basis. I said, "I'll have a little scotch and soda if I can join you."

He said, "Larry, I'd really like you to think seriously about coming to Austin and helping me out. I know that this is something that your wife may not like. She's from the city and all that, a big city. But Austin's a terrific place, and I think you ought to spend a little time down there. I think you ought to really give it some serious consideration." I said, "Mr. President, at this point I'm very close to making up my mind about coming to work for Gulf and Western." And he said, "Gulf and Western, that's that big conglomerate up there that makes all these movies." I said, "That's right." He said, "You know, the other night I saw a movie that Gulf and Western had made, called Five Card Stud with Dean Martin, and it was the worst." He got up at the edge of his chair and he said, "I'll tell you it was the worst movie, and it was all full of violence and gunning

Levinson -- V -- 6

down and sex and violence and gore, and all this. And if this is the way you want to spend your life, working for people that make movies like that, that's up to you. But I saw that movie and I'll tell you, I was never so sickened in all my life!" Then he said, "Eddie Weisl is on the board of Gulf and Western, isn't he?" I said, "That's right."

About two days later Eddie called me from New York and said, "You know the President is very upset." And I have to say, Joe, this was all going on while a decision was being made on the bombing.

F: Was there any noticeable change in his countenance when you mentioned Gulf and Western?

L: No. I think it was the first time that he had realized that it was somebody else out there that was holding out a carrot. Apparently after that he had talked to Eddie Weisl. Eddie told him that Jack Valenti was the fellow that set this thing up. So Eddie called me two days later and said, "The President is hopping mad at Jack for introducing you to Wall Street. He is absolutely furious at Jack"--

F: This is Eddie, Sr.

L: Yes--"for getting in the President's way." At this point you can imagine how I felt. I really felt, here's Jack trying to be very helpful way back in April or May, and then the idea occurred to the President that maybe he really wanted me down in Austin. It was the kind of thing [where] I always felt that when you're on the President's staff, he regarded you as his man, and if anybody would go around and tamper with his staff, he would absolutely get uptight and upset about it. He regarded it as, "These are my folks, my people, and I don't want anybody messing around with them." That's the attitude he took

Levinson -- V -- 7

toward it, which made, in some ways, life difficult for people who wanted to get out in terms of the natural termination of their careers. He felt that leaving the White House while he was still there and liked you [was] an insult to him.

F: Deserting the ship, really.

L: Yes, very much the same philosophy was carrying over here. To condense this, though, into the high point of it, there was a cabinet meeting held--and I believe the records and the minutes of the cabinet meeting will bear this out--which was a farewell meeting for all the cabinet officers. It may have been one of the last meetings held, sometime early in January or late December, where the President went around the table. Vice President Humphrey was there, I remember, and the new UN delegate, the fellow from the Washington Post was there. I remember that because the staff was also called into this. When I used to go to the cabinet meetings as an observer or to take notes or to follow on, I used to bolt for the chair furthest in the corner, because I wanted to get out of the line of fire, basically. Because I felt if I sat under the bookcase behind Humphrey, which is the seat that nobody would take because it was directly opposite the President's gaze. . . .

Well, I came into this cabinet meeting and I plunked myself down in the corner, and then I got up to go over to talk to Harry McPherson or somebody. And when I turned around to look back at my seat, everybody had already filled in. The President walked in, and I was about to go back to the corner to get my seat when Larry Temple jumped into it, or somebody filled it up. I looked down and there was only one seat left, which was that seat right behind Humphrey, which was also the seat directly in his line of

Levinson -- V -- 8

fire. When he sat down he looked at me. I knew right away that somewhere in that meeting I was going to be in for something. I didn't know what it was, but I could tell.

The meeting began with everybody going around. I remember Wilbur Cohen talking about what the President had done for education. I believe he began with Dean Rusk who talked about the President's role, his world view, and his role as a peacemaker and what he had done with the Russians, the Glassboro Summit, and the Nuclear Test Ban treaties, and the [non]proliferation of weapons in outer space, and so forth. It passed all around the table and finally got back to where the President [sat]. Everybody stood up and applauded. And it was a very emotion-packed cabinet meeting. I must say that all of us, if we were a little weaker, would have probably shed tears as grown men might do. But it was emotion-packed. Even thinking of it now, I feel the emotion of that moment.

F: Did he call on people, or did they sort of pick it up and--?

L: Well, it began with Dean Rusk, really. Then Rusk opened it as the senior cabinet officer, and then it went around.

F: Everybody did a kind of summation?

L: A summation, really. It really went around to people. Thinking back, I think Wilbur Cohen in his way really was the most eloquent, in terms of commenting on what the President had done for the older people in this country with Medicare, how this had really revolutionized a whole system of caring for the elderly in this country. It went around that way. Joe Barr, I believe, was there and talked about international monetary reform, and how we had lived through the gold crisis, and how we were dealing with the balance of payments problem. It went around the whole line, really a quick capsulation.



Levinson -- V -- 9

Pretty much toward the end of this he looked over and he said, "Well, we're all going to be going our separate ways. This is the last meeting. I'll be going back to Texas, where I hope to be able to spend some time sitting on my rocking chair in the front, dealing with the Library and my memoirs and teaching a little bit, writing a little bit, resting a little bit, and getting back to the country I love." Then he looked over, and he said, "And I would have been happy down there except for one thing. Just a little while ago, Jack Valenti came in and he took--I wanted to go down to Texas. I wanted to bring Larry Levinson down there with me. When Larry Levinson came here, he didn't know where Wall Street was." I haven't got the exact [quote], I can only paraphrase it for you. "And this fellow Jack Valenti came in and said, 'Larry, I want to introduce you to Wall Street.'"

F: I can see Larry beginning to--

L: The murmurs--Rusk and Clifford and Freeman were all beginning to laugh a little bit, and I think this was done really to take the tension out of the air. He started to say, "Larry, you never even knew where Wall Street was, and that little Jack Valenti came to you one day and led you down like a little donkey with a carrot all the way to Wall Street, when you could have been down in Austin with me. And I called Jack and I said, 'Jack, how could you do this to me!'" And in a perfect mimic of Jack Valenti, I must say, "Mr. President, I didn't do anything, Mr. President. I just told them he was a valuable piece of manpower!" Perfect mimic, and that just broke everything up.

So when you ask me about the personal side, I said I began at the end and here I am; I really should start at the beginning. This is really how I came here. Despite the

Levinson -- V -- 10

pressures on him, he knew what he wanted; he tried to do the best that he could to get it.

I must say that I explained to him that we wanted to be back in New York, that our family was here, the kids really had roots here.

F: Aren't you from this part of the world originally?

L: Yes. We grew up here and so forth, and I was really doing it for family. He knew I would always be available to help down there and do all I could to help.

He wrote me a personal note on a card, a handwritten note--which I treasure, which I put in my safe deposit box because I'm sure the President's handwritten notes to people were very few and far between--where he really understood and was very sorry but felt obviously I was in command of my own destiny, and he was very sorry that this was something I had chosen to do but he felt he could understand it. And I have that little handwritten note. It was kind of like a little invitation card.

F: He held no resentment then.

L: Absolutely not.

F: After he got over his initial disappointment.

L: Yes. I think he was more mad at probably Jack getting in the way of all this than anything else. But of course subsequently I have been down to Austin on a number of occasions, as you know, working with all of our people down there and doing some research on the book, and getting some papers organized, weighing in. I met the President several times on my trips down there, and I would say he was deeply appreciative of my taking the time to come down there and so forth.

Levinson -- V -- 11

F: I know he's by nature proprietary and paternal toward people who work with him. Did he sort of try to get everybody placed, or did he leave it somewhat up to you to find your ways?

L: I can say that, when I look at the staff, where people went afterwards--of course, Larry Temple, as you know, began the practice of law a little bit before he came up, went back to Austin, and wanted to do what he was doing. George Christian, also, of course went back to his public relations work.

F: Larry, incidentally, could probably have been chairman of our State Democratic Executive Committee. I don't know whether you're aware of this or not.

L: No, I didn't know that.

F: But he said he turned it down after being the--it was never actually offered, but he was the front runner. He said the condition of his law practice was such that he looked on this as another full-time job which he could not take on.

L: Yes. The Texas people pretty well. . .the President, as you recall, nominated Barefoot [Sanders] for a Court of Appeals judgeship in the District of Columbia, which was defeated later on, which I thought was very unfortunate. He helped Irv Sprague, who you remember had come to us after Pat Brown's defeat in California. He was, as you remember, the Washington representative of the state of California and was very helpful in terms of the congressional liaison with the California delegations. [The President] nominated Irv for FDIC, which was one of the positions that was confirmed.

Joe Califano had a very important personal decision to make *vis-a-vis* Arnold and Porter. As you know, the President was very close to Paul Porter and had spent some

Levinson -- V -- 12

time advising Joe, and highly recommending Joe in terms of Arnold and Porter, to go there. [He] told Paul that Joe was really the kind of guy who would be a terrific asset to the law firm.

When it came around, Ernie Goldstein, of course, you know came in and then he went back to Paris. He can only either breathe the air of Paris or the air of Washington and no other air because of his asthma or whatever he's got, his allergy.

Harry McPherson of course liked Washington. His roots had grown there, and [he] went back to work with Berl Bernhard, a friend of his in a law practice, and also to give him some time to write.

So, as I say, we all kind of made our way into the world after our days at the White House. The President, I say, where people had come to him for help or where people wanted things very much, had gone ahead and helped them *vis-a-vis* Irv Sprague and Barefoot.

F: I would presume Jack Valenti's job as, loosely called a czar, was at least precipitated by his White House contacts with Weisl and [Arthur] Krim and so forth as much as it was the President pushing him into it?

L: I think that's quite correct, Joe. Jack had worked as hard as any human being. As I remember, just one interesting anecdote about Jack, who used to take things with tremendous seriousness, you know. Jack hated to do anything wrong. He didn't want to get anybody--he didn't want the President mad at him. He just wanted to do everything right. And when you're working up there in those kinds of pressures, you're going to

Levinson -- V -- 13

make your share of mistakes. There's just no human way, unless you've got your flesh and blood taken out of you, to not make mistakes.

And just speaking of Jack for a minute, I remember Jack had that office halfway between--well, it was Marvin's office, and then Jack had that interim office that I think Larry Temple later moved into. But I remember walking in there one afternoon. You know the expression of "people walking around in a circle," Jack was walking around in a circle, a perfect circle, as fast as he could with a little diameter. I said, "Jack, why are you walking around in a circle like this?" He said, "What I've been through! What I've been through!" And [he] just couldn't stop getting out of this little treadmill he'd just been walking around. "I didn't want to do this. Everything has to be done right now, you know," just walking on his little treadmill. This is a reflection on Jack.

But as far as Jack was concerned, yes, I think the President understood Jack's problems. I might say the same thing. I never really understood Bill Moyers', I must say that, the circumstances of his departure, so I don't want to deal with hearsay.

F: I was going to ask you about that, if you had any firsthand knowledge?

L: No, I really didn't, although the President later reflected to me and to Joe, I guess, in some moments that he did this for Bill, because after the death of Bill's brother, Bill came on with an enormous burden financially where he not only had to support his brother's family, but his own family as well as the folks down in Marshall, Texas. I guess that is where Bill came from, if I'm not mistaken. Bill had come to him and said he had to really leave because right after his brother's death the financial situation was such that he just had to come to grips with reality. Here was an offer that was put in front of him, which

Levinson -- V -- 14

was a six-figure job in a field that he loved very much, and a chance that he could really do something and then maybe one day inherit the whole mess out there, *Newsday*. That was the only explanation that I got from the President, that he really bent over backwards to counsel with Bill and try to help him, understanding that these financial pressures were such that this was something that he ought to do.

F: While we're on that personal note, the White House assistant's salary looks pretty good if you're sitting in Muleshoe, Texas or Oneida, New York, but with what Washington costs and with what your own demands are, no one can live on it. It's inadequate. So I presume where you didn't have some private subsidization, everybody hocked himself somewhat to get through. Did the President take an interest in that and refer you to certain people, to bankers to look after you, or did you just go your own way and make your own notes and so forth?

L: What I did, Joe, frankly, our lifestyle was so--let me say this: I had no personal life. There was no place we could go. We couldn't really go on any vacations except to the Virgin Islands, which I'll relate to you, if we have some moments, on the rest home at the Virgin Islands which, I think, is an interesting story. I don't have this down on my list, but you've reminded me of it.

No. I would say this. I think my salary when I left, or the last year at the White House, was something on the order of \$27,000 or \$28,000 a year. For me personally, I don't have an extravagant lifestyle. We live in a very modest house, a comfortable house. We didn't have any college expenses, still dealing with a young family. As a matter of

Levinson -- V -- 15

fact, I managed--probably one of the only few fellows who managed--to save a few dollars, because I never went anywhere. Never could spend any money on anything.

F: The only place you went--and this ain't no bad deal--was to the White House, and that's free. (Laughter)

L: Was to the White House and back, and that was for nothing. I remember that I told my wife that my only knowledge of the outdoors was getting up in the morning and walking the three paces out of our side door into the carport to get in the car to drive to the White House. I had parking lot space 34, which was right near the door to the West Basement, and those five steps or twenty steps to the West Basement, and that was all I ever used to see of sunlight. I used to get out of there at ten o'clock at night or whatever the hour was. Of course, I followed the same pattern.

So when it came to just personal expenses, when it came to parties, for example, I remember one of the inconveniences was that we always used to arrive in separate cars. I used to come meet my wife on a Friday night at ten-thirty, coming out of the White House in one car; she'd arrive there at nine o'clock in her car, which meant we always used to leave these parties in separate cars. You know, when you're getting invited around a lot, you don't pay for it. We didn't do much entertaining because we never knew whether I could be there or not.

F: You couldn't set a party for Friday night a week and have any idea you'd be there.

L: You'd never really knew whether I'd be there. So, Joe, I didn't have any personal financial problems. If I were a little older and had kids going through college at the same time, that might have presented a different situation. But the way it was, as I say, I think

Levinson -- V -- 16

I was one of the few people that actually squirreled some money away. It wasn't a lot of money but I actually saved a little bit of money.

F: Before we get lost, tell us about the Virgin Islands retreat.

L: This is a story, as they say in Gilbert and Sullivan, that "would rank with few romances."

It was a place that Bill Moyers had discovered in terms of his contacts with Governor [Ralph] Paiewonsky who was, as you know, appointed. The Governor had an administrative assistant, who was a black named Louis Schulerbrandt from an old Virgin Island family; had probably come up through the slave route and then had made it into the civil government.

And at the end of the first year when Joe and I had worked to put the legislative program together, everything was done pretty much in good shape, around March. The State of the Union had gone up. I'm thinking now about 1966, I guess this was. We had gotten everything up. Things were germinating. Joe then said, "I am so exhausted I'm going to take off for two weeks." So I said, "Joe, where are you going?" He said, "Well, I'm going to the Virgin Islands." I said, "Where in the Virgin Islands are you going?" He said, "Bill Moyers has set up something for me down there. Trudy and I are going to go down. And if I like it, I'll let you know about it and maybe when I get back, since you're going to have to take over while I'm gone, you ought to go down there with Bunny and take some time off."

So I said, "Joe, don't you think you ought to let me go first? I think I'm more tired than you are." He said, "No, I've got to go first. I've already arranged it."



Levinson -- V -- 17

So Joe left and went to the Virgin Islands, came back two weeks later and said, "What a great place!" He said, "All you've got to do is pay your air fare down there, Pan Am, and Schulterbrandt meets you at the airport with a car and a chauffeur and the rest of it's yours. The Governor's got a house way up on the spine of the mountains."

F: Is this on St. Thomas?

L: Yes, on St. Thomas. "There's a cook and a maid and you can just unwind. You can lie out on the beach if you want to, take you down to the beach or if you want to sleep all day, you can." And Joe, going down there looking like a ghost, came back looking in the most vibrant state of health I'd ever seen him.

So, after that I'd arranged to go down and Joe had called Schulterbrandt. Sure enough, around May or something like that we flew down, the first vacation. They met us at the airport and it was just terrific. We got a ride up to this house and I got into the house, which was a typical little villa. I looked at the guest list. They want everybody to sign in. I began to look down the guest list and I almost fell over because it looked to me like that guest house was a place of refuge for most officials in the Johnson Administration! I looked down and I saw Stanley Surrey and Mrs. Surrey, the assistant secretary of the treasury, Orville and Mrs. Freeman, Trudy and Joe Califano, Harry and I forget his wife's name, McPherson, Bill Moyers. I just started leafing through the book, and there wasn't a week that there wasn't somebody from the administration down there at this guest house.

I don't think the President knew this. In fact, I'm almost convinced he had no knowledge of what was going on.

Levinson -- V -- 18

F: Strictly word of mouth, huh?

L: Yes. And each comment was more and more "What a terrific vacation!" "What a place to unwind!" Even [Arthur] Goldberg's name, I think as I look back, was down there. So the first year I came back completely recharged. They just did everything for us. The last time I was down there was during March of 1968. Now we had made it a practice that after the legislative program would go up we would go down there and unwind. And we really needed it down there. That was the only vacation to speak of--

F: Was it basically big enough for one family?

L: Yes, right. And there was a cook.

F: It wasn't where several of you would go?

L: No, it was just for one family. You didn't really want anybody around. There were a couple of bedrooms and it was overlooking, it was on the cliff.

F: If you had somebody around, you'd probably wind up talking shop and working.

L: It was just some place to really just completely let loose. I don't think the President ever realized that it was a haven, a refuge for the tired staff on the White House, until March of 1968 when I happened to be down there for my share of the week or ten days, I guess it was. This was the frightful week in which not only did he announce on March 31 that he was not running again, and which I heard incidentally over a little portable radio, which was being beamed in from Puerto Rico. We couldn't believe our ears when we heard it, sitting in the living room of our retreat in the Virgin Islands.

F: I bet you felt like you were in Antarctica.

Levinson -- V -- 19

L: I must tell you, it was a total, absolute shock. Incidentally, while we were there, within an hour Jim Gaither had called me, said "Did you hear about the President?" I said, "Yes, I heard it." He said, "Well, you know, John Robson and I were here. Joe is sick." When he came back from the Virgin Islands he got something, a bubble in his stomach and he actually was in the hospital at that time. He said, "We just finished the bottle of Cutty Sark left over from Joe's liquor cabinet when we heard this, because we're working on the campaign. Now there's no campaign to work on anymore. It's now one o'clock in the morning here, and we just wanted to let you know we were thinking of you. And you're down there and that's just terrific."

Well, in any event, then Martin Luther King was assassinated within a few days after that, and the President screamed for me. He wanted [Harry] Middleton and I to do a memorial resolution, and Joe said that I was in the Virgin Islands. He said, "What's he doing down there?" He said, "Well, Mr. President, he's with Paiewonsky and Schusterbrandt." And at that point it all came out. "What's he doing down there? Why?" At that point when I got back--and I must say I got back in a period of tremendous turmoil, as you know--when I got off the plane in Washington, I had already seen smoke billowing up from the city of Washington coming in by air, and had no idea what was going on.

F: Did you come into National?

L: Yes. I had no idea what was going on except I said, "Gee, there's a big fire going on down there." And it was only then that I realized that the city was in a state of civil chaos. I came into the White House and everybody was totally grim-faced. This was,

Levinson -- V -- 20

you know, a completely tragic and serious moment. I walked in there with a glowing tan, which I couldn't do anything about! There was just no way to do it. Within the next morning or so the President saw me with a tan, and you'll have to remember that everybody there was--

F: Pale and--

L: I stood out. Pale and grim. And--"Well, here's old Larry. He just always knows when to go. Go down to that big retreat down there that we taxpayers have been paying for. I hope the Republicans find out about this, because it's going to be one of the biggest scandals of this administration! They go down there. It's a retreat down in the Virgin Islands."

F: Who actually owned it?

L: It was the Governor's house, which he didn't use because during those months he was with--

F: It went with the office?

L: Yes, it did go with the office, right, and it was a house. I remember, strangely enough, meeting a lot of people down there. I met Frank Wozencraft, who was squirreled away in another house down there.

F: Yes, I remember when Frank went.

L: And he called me and he said this is the worst scandal he had ever come across, that White House aides were getting free vacations down in some lush tropical resort. Only, the way he could build it up. Just wanted to--

F: Wrong place at the wrong time.

Levinson -- V -- 21

L: To show how I walked into the White House with a suntan coming back from my quote "vacation to the Virgin Islands when the country was sitting in the state of calamity," you know.

F: You didn't have much chance to savor the vacation after you got home?

L: No, after that my tan vanished very quickly.

F: Did the President have someone from the White House staff acting as a sort of an observer during this riot period? I know all that the Justice Department did, and the Park Service and police, and all that sort of thing, Walter Washington's group. But I mean just from a standpoint was there somebody, for instance, up there on the second floor at the half-moon east windows watching to see what was going on?

L: Are you talking about Washington or the whole country?

F: I'm talking about Washington.

L: What we did--I remember the next morning there was a meeting in Joe's office, and I think it was the day right after the assassination when things were getting very rugged. Pat Murphy, who is now the police commissioner of New York City, was then the director of public safety, came in unshaven--for Pat. He really looked, you know--he'd been up all night. And the Mayor came in; he'd been up all night. Ramsey was in there, Ramsey Clark, I believe. And we sat around the table, the police chief was there; met right in the White House in Joe's office, to talk about how to handle the problem, you know, in terms of minimum force, in terms of restraint. Murphy, I remember, was very eloquent saying that "We want to be sure that the army fellows don't shoot. We don't want to have shooting. They're going to have to learn how to use the proper force. My

Levinson -- V -- 22

police department has been. The Chief"--I guess it was [John B.] Layton at the time--"we want to be very careful." And I remember Murphy being extremely deliberate in his way of speaking, through this mist of exhaustion. I think Cy Vance we had put down as a special monitor. One of the things we kept telling the Mayor was, "Go on the air. Get on television as much as you can, particularly on the news. Try to get a sense of order and calmness about things settling down." Our feeling was to have the Mayor as visible as he could be.

F: He didn't panic in a situation like this?

L: No. I want to say that there was never any group of more collectedly calm individuals than around that meeting in Joe's office that morning. That was the D.C. government; [they] had come for kind of aid and support from us, and counsel, and that sort of led to the decision to have Cy Vance, who had gone through Detroit, you recall, and to act as the kind of Mayor's advisor on these things. And we I remember kept saying, "Look, there are young fellows in there, make sure you have plenty of black sergeants, you know, and let them get into the ghetto."

The damage, you know, was frightful in physical terms, and even months later, years later, in fact, areas of the city still look like they had been bombed.

F: You can still drive through there--

L: Right. The victim of this whirlwind of damage. But I think if you look at the physical, personal statistics, there were many arrests made but I think the casualty lists were pretty well down. Mainly I say the Mayor was very calm throughout the whole situation. Pat Murphy was a model of restraint.

Levinson -- V -- 23

F: I presume all other work just tends to cease?

L: When you're dealing with that, right. I remember we had a map of Washington. We knew where all the [National] Guard units had been deployed. Things kind of in a couple of days just got to a point with the Mayor going on the air, the Mayor being visible, the Mayor being on the radio saying, "Everything is now under control."

F: Who wrote the "We Shall Overcome" speech?

L: You're talking now earlier in the game?

F: Yes.

L: I have to say this, Joe. The "We Shall Overcome" speech was given probably--

F: It's one of the landmark speeches.

L: I was trying to remember. Was that in July of 1965, do you recall, something like that?

F: Yes.

L: The "We Shall Overcome" speech was delivered, I think, either just before I got to the White House or after I got to the White House. I would only guess--this is not based on knowledge, it is only based on deduction--that when it came to dramatic phraseology, when it came to the most articulate form of conveying or expressing things, the sense of a drama, I think Dick Goodwin was the one responsible. He could put words together because he had the knack.

I told the President much later in the game that the only successful speech writers in the history of this country had been playwrights. Robert Sherwood really knew how to put things together for FDR. In a sense, although Dick Goodwin was not a playwright, he did possess a sense of drama, a sense of poetry.

Levinson -- V -- 24

F: Building to something, you know.

L: Yes. I might say that in two of the President's speeches, the "We Shall Overcome" where he picked up the idiom of togetherness [of] the civil rights movement, and so on, was matched probably by something even more effective in another speech, I believe probably written by Jack Valenti. I would say that I would deduce the credit for the "We Shall Overcome" may have come from Goodwin's brain, although I just don't know that for a fact.

Another speech was given where the President--it might have been during the continuity period, right after the assassination--ended up with the words from "America, the Beautiful." "America, God shed his grace on thee, from sea to"--he ended up the speech with words that every school child knows. It's something that I always suspected that Jack did, which had the most stunning effect, to be creative enough to come back to something as basic as that, and strike that great chord of patriotism in people.

F: Something that you've sung that's almost become banal you know, but suddenly you pull it out.

L: Not to sing it, but just to hear the words, those familiar beautiful words about America. And when you mentioned "We Shall Overcome," yes, that was a moment of great force and drama. But I also have to tell you that it was certainly matched in power at the time that the "America, America" lines were used. I just don't recall the context of that speech, but it was a tremendously important occasion, and he used that.



Levinson -- V -- 25

F: I thought he did an excellent job, too, in these emotional moments after Bobby Kennedy's death, "In God's name," or "How long in the name of God are we going to endure this sort of thing?"

L: Right, this was his plea for gun control legislation. I recall that. Right. "What does it take to get the Congress?"--he was using this again as a measure of focusing pressure on the Congress, as you recall. And there was legislation passed, gun control legislation, which was not all we wanted but it was the first breakthrough in national gun control legislation. I think he was at that point particularly bitter at the National Rifle Association and took no exception, no pains to point out that the fact that a group of self-interested lobbyists were trying to pressure this bill out. And the Congress at this moment should not yield to the pressures of a gun lobby. I think he took that on, when he was really his best, his wonderful, swinging, combative best, where he would really know how to take on the opposition.

F: Let's get back to our stories.

L: Right. I think the Virgin Islands--

F: I presume that ended the jaunts to the Virgin Islands?

L: I think at that point nobody would have [had] enough boldness to tell the President when he was going, where he would be going, and where he could be reached. At times we would send a note into the President saying, "Mr. President, if it's all right with you, my wife and I would like to go off to spend about eight or nine days away. I can be reached through the office. Everything is up to date. Yes or no." And he would say "Yes," but

Levinson -- V -- 26

we never would say where we were going. We were very careful never to say where we were.

I particularly have an episode in mind that relates to the Subversive Activities Control Board which I think illustrates another aspect of life at the White House. You recall that the Subversive Activities Control Board was under a great deal of fire from the liberal wings of the Congress, particularly [Senator William] Proxmire and others who felt there was no legitimate purpose for the SACB any longer, because the courts had pretty well indicated that an administrative board had no power to make adjudications of political affiliation and therefore impose penalties as a result thereby. Pretty well the Subversive Activities Control Board had nothing to do, namely as a result of two factors: the court's decisions, which pretty well took their powers away, plus the fact that the Department of Justice under Ramsey Clark was not referring any matters to them.

F: They just collected salary.

L: We had a board that was sitting there collecting salary. Yet on the other hand the board was very important to two senators in particular, Senator Dirksen and Senator Mansfield. And it was important to Senator Mansfield not out of any ideological conviction--maybe so--but the fact that a Montanan by the name of John Mahan was the chairman of the Subversive Activities Control Board, and Mike Mansfield loved John Mahan.

The issue that was coming up was the appropriations and authorization to continue the board. And there was also a vacancy on the board at that point. I think one of the fellows had passed away or something like that. There was one vacancy on the board, and there was this tremendous fight going on within the Congress. I believe both

Levinson -- V -- 27

Mansfield and Dirksen had come to see the President about continuing the board only because they, and Dirksen particularly, felt that maybe the board ought to be getting into some other things as well, getting into some of the militant movements here in the United States and get away solely from communism which may no longer be a viable issue. But there were others that still felt that there was a communist threat, and that the very presence of the board was a good deterrent to show the government wasn't going to let anybody get away with things.

And there was a great debate raging in the White House staff between whether, as a matter of principle, the administration ought to back away from this board or whether they ought to support it. I remember particularly Harry McPherson was one of the people that may have written a memo or may have talked to the President about it, saying, "Let's face facts. This board shouldn't exist anymore. It has outlived its usefulness. It's a joke. The members are drawing \$26-27,000 a year. They haven't had a case in months. And one goes over to their office to find out what they're doing and their desks are covered with dust. People check in in the morning and go out and so forth." And "Mr. President,"--and Harry would make these arguments--"just forget about the board."

One morning I got a call--and I don't remember whether it was from Marvin Watson or somebody--to say that the chairman of the board, John Mahan, was coming in to see me with the counsel for the board, Frank Hunter, and wanted me to sit down and work with them on developing a case for the continuation of the board, which he could get into the hands of the senators who were proponents to argue the cause for the board. So I said, "Marvin," and I can't recall whether it was Marvin or Jim Jones at this point, "I

Levinson -- V -- 28

think this is something we shouldn't do. I think the board's a disgrace. I don't think we ought to do it." "You meet with Mahan and you meet with Hunter. The President wants you to see them." So I said, "All right."

And in a little while later in came Mahan and Hunter. And Joe, if you remember the faces and the figures out of the McCarthy days, the people who were on these witch hunts all kind of looked the same way. These fellows came out and, honest to God, they looked like times past. Here we were in 1968, I guess. These fellows looked like they were throw-backs.

F: Really a period piece.

L: Almost to the clothes they were wearing, time had kind of stopped. And I noted the anachronism, you know. And both very pleasant by the way, very nice gentlemen.

So I said, "All right, I've got a job to do. Let's go to the conference room up on the second floor. We'll sit down and you tell me all about the board." So they gave me a whole briefing on the board, what it did, some legislation they had drafted to take away some of the nullifications of the Supreme Court and all that. I sat down, I put this all together in a kind of briefing paper, listing every argument for the board that I drew out of Mahan and I sent it in.

F: Did you challenge them so that they could develop justification?

L: Oh, yes, yes. I was trying to argue a case. But there seemed to be--"If only the Justice Department referred more cases, if we can get into some of the W. E. B. DuBois-organization type situations, if we could get some of these things off the courts that are held up in the courts, we've got some legislation that will cure some of these things. We

Levinson -- V -- 29

do serve a function. We're a deterrent. We ought to have a board like that, and it doesn't cost a lot of money as far as the government's concerned."

So I wrote this with as much conviction as I could muster, and sent it in with a little note saying, "Here it is. It's the best I can do, although it isn't that great." The next morning I remember I got a call to come see the President, and he caught me in the passageway between Marvin's office and his own office, where you didn't have too much room to move. He said, "I read this document that you submitted, in which you purport to justify the continuation of the Subversive Activities Control Board, and I want to tell you it's pretty piss poor." Excuse me, Joe, am I permitted to use expletives in this thing?

F: Sure, I've got worse than that.

L: I said, "Mr. President, there are a lot of things that we do around here that we try to muster the best arguments. Frankly, you've got a lousy case on this thing." And I said, "Harry McPherson agrees that we have a very bad situation here," which was absolutely the wrong thing to have told him at that moment, because apparently something Harry had done had gotten him. He stopped and he took the paper and he stared down at me and he said, "Harry don't know shit from Shinola! He don't know anything. He ought to be back there writing poetry, because he's not fit to be in this government. He doesn't know anything." I didn't know all the background but I was so thunderstruck by this thing. "Well," he said, "All right, I've got this. Get it over to Manatos and see what we can do up there. We have a fight of our lives on our hands on this thing. I'm not going to lose this. But we're not going to be for it or against it. We're going to let the Congress do it. We're just going to back away from it."

Levinson -- V -- 30

Now remember, there was one opening on this board. And a couple of days later the rumor began to circulate that someone on the White House staff might be appointed to this board, and I said to myself--you know how your mind works--"I couldn't in my wildest dreams think that because of the fact that I had had this episode that he was going to put me, in ironic justice, on the board!"

F: That would have put you in a good spot.

L: My heart began to pound, and I must say that for the next day or so I almost lost a little enthusiasm. I began to get very nervous knowing that if I were ever confronted with this, it would be too late to do anything about it, because I'm sure my commission would have been signed. My heart began--one of the few times when I began to get physically affected by the prospect of something that was so horrendous to contemplate. I began to get a little nervous; didn't have much appetite those days. Well, at ten o'clock one morning Marvin said the President would want to see me at four-thirty that afternoon.

F: Here it comes!

L: I said, "Oh-oh, this is it!" I noticed [William] Hopkins, about a quarter after four, going into the President's office with a commission.

F: This is sort of a White House version of Kafka, isn't it?

L: That's right, something like that. I already had what I was going to do and how I could possibly face this issue. I believe you have to be confirmed--I don't recall if it was a confirmation process. But I was really without taste in my mouth when I saw Hopkins rush up there with a commission. Four-thirty came and I was getting nervous, really nervous, and I went in there. I was waiting in Marvin's office and he was looking at me

Levinson -- V -- 31

and smiling as if he knew something that I didn't know. Then a few minutes later he said, "Joe Califano, come in here right away, too." I said, "Oh my God, he's going to present this in front of Joe!"

F: He was going to have a ceremony.

L: Going to have a ceremony. And Tom Johnson came in and I thought, "He's going to have some press come in, too." I didn't know, but I knew something terrible was about to befall me.

F: Getting stage managed, I can see it.

L: So at that point my heart was palpitating at one hundred and eighty beats a minute. I would say the longest walk in my life was the walk from Marvin's office through that little corridor to the President's office. I walked in and there the President was sitting at his desk, with this commission, and standing off to one side was Vicky McCammon-- Vicky McHugh--and Simon. I for a moment said, "Gee, don't tell me he invited them here, too."

F: Now who are they?

L: Vicky McCammon, you recall, was the President's secretary at one time. She was one of the President's secretaries, married Simon McHugh who is in the real estate business, I think, in Washington. I said, "Gee, isn't that something! I guess he wants to have some young people around to witness the end of my life." He said, "Larry, I wanted you especially and Joe to come in here to witness this, because I'm about to appoint Simon McHugh to the Subversive Activities Control Board." At that time, the relief, and the lifting of this cloud, and the way it was done was something where I was almost about to

Levinson -- V -- 32

break into uncontrollable laughter because the thing had come out. And Marvin was beaming, because he knew that this whole thing was a wonderful way of staging the thing and all that.

F: Do you think the President had set it up this way?

L: I don't know. Joe, I really don't know, but I can only tell you that maybe a lot of it was my own imagination and maybe a lot of it was the fact that he figured--

F: Well, all the pieces were fitting up to that time.

L: Yes. That I was the one fellow who had worked on the thing. After he signed Simon's commission, I remember the press then attacked him for appointing McHugh who had no other qualifications other than being the husband of a president's secretary, which was really a way of getting at the board, not so much at McHugh necessarily. He was certainly a heck of a lot better than anybody else they had on there. He said, "Now Larry, I've got one very important assignment. I want you to spend a lot of time with Si over here, and I want you to tell him all about the board. I want you to brief him on the board. [I] want you to give him cases to read and I want you to really get together and work with him and make sure we really turn this thing into a topnotch board." And that's the way that ended.

F: You at that point felt like saying "Anything you want!"

L: I said, "Yes, Mr. President." (Laughter)

Joe, can I suggest we take a break here.

(Interruption)

F: Larry, let's talk a little bit about Mary Wells, as a speech writer.



Levinson -- V -- 33

L: Joe, the Mary Wells story is one that I had some personal participation in, and I take you back to the days of late 1966 when two very important pieces of legislation had come down the ways, one being the Highway Safety Act, or the Auto Safety Act, and the other being the amendments to the Minimum Wage Act, which were both key items in the President's legislative program. And as you know, the bill signings were always looked at with great ceremony and great interest, and the President took particular delight in commemorating the end of an experience, if you will, by a final act of using the ten pens to sign the bill. That got to be a great occasion.

Well, around that time the President was getting a little unhappy about the quality of signing speeches that were coming up his way, mainly because I guess the fellows who had been writing them were turning them out. Don't forget we had a lot of legislation passed and the ax, the fine hone of your ax, tends to get a little blunted when you keep chopping away.

F: You don't have time to sit and let things kind of season and gestate.

L: That's right. You're just churning out. As fast as the bills were passed, we were sitting there writing out statements.

Now, the Highway Safety Bill particularly was something that we had advocated very strongly. And Ralph Nader, of course, had come along at that time with his book *Unsafe at Any Speed*, and his testimony had created a very favorable climate, particularly in the Senate, for the passage of that bill. Although I must say that the House was not similarly inclined, and people tend to forget the fight in the House was pretty terrific. That's one of the places in which we weighed in very heavily.

Levinson -- V -- 34

Then the bill was finally passed on auto safety, and as Bill Hopkins told us, "The bill is coming over and the President's got ten days to sign it." We told the President. Yes, he wanted to have a big signing ceremony and get all the auto people in and the highway people in. He was going to announce at that ceremony the appointment of the new highway administrator or the director of highway safety, Dr. [William] Haddon, which was the news peg around which the signing was to take place. He would be called right up from the audience, saying "This is so important, without delay I've already announced the appointment of the man to take charge of this program, under Alan Boyd." Just a nice kind of thing that the President always liked to do.

Well, the assignment, in the normal course for preparing the signing statement, went across to the speech writers, and Bob Hardesty, I recall, or Will Sparks--I probably remember it being Bob--was given the job of putting the speech together. And as the custom was in those days, one of our fellows would go over and work with the speech writer and give him the highlights of the bill and some of the pertinent background and personalities and so forth to move in. Bob and I spent some time, and we really honed this speech up to what I call a pretty good lather. We just really had the thing done exactly the way we thought the President would see this, and he just would be so taken by its eloquence and design that he would give it a big vote of approval.

So the speech was put together and sent into the President. I got up the next morning, anxious to get to the White House, anxious to get the results from Juanita Roberts, knowing we could get it on the cards. The President would be very happy with the way it had been put together. And as I got there that morning, I found out to my

Levinson -- V -- 35

horror and amazement and shock that the President didn't like the speech at all, but that there was some other speech somewhere downstairs that he preferred and that was being busily typed on the cards for him to voice it.

So I ran down on the pretext of saying, "I've got to check this out to make sure it's legally correct from a policy standpoint." I started to read the speech and it began in a way that I don't think I'll ever forget. Something like this: "Fifty thousand dead on the highway. Five thousand on the battlefield. Fifty thousand on the highway; five thousand on the battlefield." That's the way it began. It carried on from there. And as I read it, I must say that I was happy to be defeated by that kind of a speech for the President that was really superb. I then immediately called Bob, and I said, "Bob"--or Will, I can't remember at this point who it was--"there's another speech over here and I've got to tell you it's great." And Bob and Will threw their hands up, and it was then that I discovered that the speech had been prepared or written by Mary Wells of advertising fame and public relations fame.

F: Future wife of Harding--

L: Future wife of Harding Lawrence of Braniff. Somehow she had gotten into the President's orbit. I don't know how. Maybe you know, the introduction or what-have-you, or even how he asked her help on the speeches. It might have been through Bob Kintner. I just have no idea, but in any event I knew--I had never seen her--that she was working away on these things. Our fellows were pretty well flabbergasted.

But they had another ace up their sleeve, because right after this bill was signed there was another big one coming down the way, which was the minimum wage. And if

Levinson -- V -- 36

there was anything that our fellows prided themselves on, it was writing good, taut signing-statements on that kind of social legislation. So they went to work again. They rolled their sleeves up, and they started putting something together on the minimum wage and golly, again, we went through the same process. I went over there, and we honed the speech up and lit up a Marlboro afterwards with great satisfaction, saying, "Well, it's done and we're really going to get it. It's going to be terrific."

And lo and behold, the next day that speech came out with a big "X" across it, and there was another one being furiously typed on the cards. I ran down there, and it began again in a way that I won't forget. It said something like this: "In the thirties when you were poor you were one of the boys, you were not alone. In the sixties when you're poor, you're alone." Again, that captured the whole--

F: It grabbed you right in the--

L: Right up there. I said, "Not again!" They said, "Yes, again." I said, "Fellows, I don't know how we can compete with this genius. Maybe we ought to just let her take this whole thing over, because there's just going to be no way we're going to win anymore. That's it." I remember in that speech, it was not only a speech of great compassion but [one] where the President singled out [individuals]. He said something like, "This bill takes care of the lady that gets up at six o'clock in the morning to wash your shirts, and it also takes care of the cook that gets up to put the coffee grounds in the big machines so that your coffee can be nice and hot when you get up to order a cup of coffee in the corner restaurant." The touches that were put into this thing so deeply showed the President's own identification with, really, the common people of this country.

Levinson -- V -- 37

F: Kind of personalized it.

L: The great unwashed, if you will, the people that serve us that you don't see, the laundress and the waiter and the short-order cook and the people that really make up so much of this country.

F: Why didn't she keep on writing?

L: Again this is another surmise on my part, but not much longer after that, the next time we had a signing ceremony our speech kind of went through. There was no opposition.

F: It must be a little disheartening though to knock your brains out on one and then to see it superseded.

L: But I then remember reading in the "Periscope" column of Newsweek that there was some identification of the fact that Mary Wells had come to the White House to help on some speeches or help give some public relations counsel. How that got in there, I don't know. I don't know whether somebody in Mary's agency had leaked it or whether it had been done to show the prominence of the ad agency as a booster for them. There's no way of knowing what happened. But from the advent of that article, Mary Wells was never heard of again. She no longer gave us great competitive fits!

F: Why didn't Bob Kintner have a bigger effect on the President as far as staging was concerned, or did he?

L: I'll say this to you, Joe, I know that we felt very strongly that the President was not getting across to the country. When I say "we," I mean we on the staff. It was very clear--I'm now talking about the period of 1966 and a half, 1967, around in there--where when you would contrast the natural settings--of course he had the historic events as a

Levinson -- V -- 38

backdrop, the continuity, the assassination, the first speech at the Lincoln Memorial, the civil rights acts, all of these tended to be a kind of a favorable backdrop which lent great majesty and drama to almost anything the President said.

Maybe it was a combination of not having those big events coming up anymore in 1967, 1968, 1966, during that period, and not having those events come up because of the continuing preoccupation with Southeast Asia at the time. Maybe it was that. Maybe it was a combination of the President crawling into what I always felt to be "hunkering down," the kind of ways he was most comfortable with, which were the older ways, not necessarily the ways of modern communication. And all of us who were watching this happen and who were commenting about it--I guess we must have talked to George Christian about it and others, maybe this is before George got there. I forget. I think maybe some transition when George came in and he was working down with Walt, working down in the basement for awhile. In any event, Bob Kintner came on and those of us who had known him only by reputation as a man who had built news networks into prominence, as a man who really understood the media, we said, "Ah, here's a guy who is not only a close friend of Lyndon Johnson's, but, my gosh, as a close friend and as a leading executive who has made his way in the world, that this would be ideal. Maybe we'll get a turnaround."

So things began happening that we noticed. For example, lighting was shifted around for the television, and we noticed the style of the glasses changed a little bit. I remember particularly one evening when the President returned from either his Southeast Asia trip or one of the trips around the world, when he landed at Andrews Air Force

Levinson -- V -- 39

Base, there in the rain under the umbrella he gave a speech of returning. Bob Kintner and I watched that in Bob's office in the basement of the White House, which was something that Bob obviously had engineered. It was a natural setting. It looked almost documentary in nature, the President returning from a mission of state, you know, making a speech with the umbrella.

F: Almost staged the rain, didn't he?

L: Yes. Almost looked like something you'd picture in a history book right there, and we said, "Ah, finally the thing--this is terrific."

Well, Joe, after that I'll have to say that things really didn't get any better. We had one burst of glory with the famous lavalier mike, free-form press conference. But beyond that it got to be increasingly more difficult to break into new ways and new things. As I noticed that this performance was going down, Bob Kintner was then doing more and more nontelevision, noncommunications work. He was doing cabinet secretary work, follow-through with the cabinet officers. And where the President was getting his communication media advice from, I just don't know, as we began to make the transitions into the later years. I personally felt, and I know this was shared by other people, that our greatest failing as staff members was probably not to take enough cognizance of the fact that he wasn't getting his message across to the country; that we were doing the things in the same way, signing the bills, there was a repetitive pattern. We needed a new format; we needed a new way, and it was never developed.

F: On Bob Kintner, for a moment, now here comes a man who has represented the gray flannel suit and all of that; had his own empire to run. It's great to be thirty-two years

Levinson -- V -- 40

old, or even forty-two years old, and be in the White House, but what happens to a man who comes in from that level? Does the White House tame him to a certain extent, or does he come in as the kind of big exec and throw his weight around?

L: I'll say this to you, all of us who had come into the White House via step [sic] from the government looked a little bit with awe. Here's a man who had really made it big in the outside world. At first there was a great deal of, you know, respect for the man who was president of the National Broadcasting Company and then ABC and so forth.

But I can't tell you, Joe, for a fact whether the position tamed the man or other factors were involved, but that Bob I think really gradually lost hold of the President and possibly even of himself. I don't know what inner-devils he was trying to work out, but the President may have pulled him in as a kind of rehabilitation operation. And one place you don't get rehabilitated in is the White House. You can't. There's just no time, there's no way in terms of the pressure.

So I say that Bob had his day. He had the most formidable contacts with the press, of course. He was developing programs for the cabinet officers in how they ought to handle themselves with the press. He was setting up interviews. This way of handling the return from the trip in the rain, you know, which all was a natural setting, all looked like--and then things happened. And I can't tell you what happened [or] why it happened. I just don't know that for hard fact and I don't want to conjecture, either. But something happened to Bob and at that point Charlie Maguire, just within the staff, who you recall came to the White House first as a White House Fellow working for Jack, and after his fellowship expired stayed on to work for Bob. Charlie was spending increasingly more



Levinson -- V -- 41

time handling the Kintner speech-writing operation. In time, when Bob left, because of his problem with his eyes, the fact that he was losing his vision and had to have the matter corrected surgically, Charlie Maguire just rode into this vacuum that was left by the departure of Bob Kintner.

Yes, I say that Bob in his heyday, in his days of power and creativity might have done the President an awful lot of good, but I think, except for one or two good shots, that was about it.

F: You really got him after he had peaked, in a sense.

L: I don't know whether anybody ever really peaks, Joe, that way, but he may have had--you remember essentially he was working with a young staff. I just don't know what his personal problem was. I don't know what his own personal devils were that he was trying to work out of his system, but it was quite clear that you knew it was only a matter of time when he would have to announce his departure. And it did come, you know, in a way that most people understood.

I might, on the last segment of this interview today at least, make two other quick comments. One is, when the President would go off on a trip as he did, you recall, to Australia and through the Far East and to Manila, the time sequences were really way out of whack with the United States, nor was his input of news really good even though he has all this communications media. One of the jobs that we had, one of the responsibilities that I had, was to prepare for transmission to him a daily summary of everything that was happening in the government and anything else that might be of interest to him, *vis-a-vis* the economy and things people were saying. So I, together with

Levinson -- V -- 42

a White House Fellow named Bill Graham, who came to us from IBM, every morning, I guess with Fred Panzer's help, would put together our edition of a special newspaper for LBJ, where we had worked out a procedure with the government agencies to send us their items of significance during the day.

F: Would you send that by voice?

L: No, we'd put that by cable. We always knew through the Situation Room where we could reach him. We called this the LBJ special newspaper, where for him only, in the course of a crisp summary we would outline on a daily basis--we did this through the weekend, too, because we had shifts--what was happening in the government: any messages that cabinet officers wanted to get to him on an urgent basis, how the economy was doing, the Dow-Jones averages, I remember, we used to put in what was significant, how the press was reacting to his trip as we were seeing it from here. Every day we used to send these things out. And as you know, to do it right, to get it crisp would take a lot of time. So during the course of that whole whirlwind trip through Manila, Vietnam, Australia--

F: How many words are we talking about per transmission?

L: Joe, I'd say that if you looked at a sheet of eight and a half by eleven, I'd say one could line up about three of these, one behind the other, and that was the length of the transmission. Well, we sent them out, and we tried to be crisp and concise, and we didn't want to pose too many decisions in this paper because you didn't know where these things would channel through and who would see them. But in any event, that was one

Levinson -- V -- 43

of the ways in which we kept the President informed, the LBJ Special, the Daily Special Bulletin.

And the night that he returned from this Southeast Asia whirlwind trip was a night also of great rain and fog. This was one of his longest periods away from the White House on a trip. And all of the staff, I remember, assembled--it was nine-thirty at night--in the diplomatic entrance, the portico of the Mansion waiting for the President to come in. Sure enough we heard the chopper, and it came in. The first guy off the chopper was Jake Jacobsen, who looked like he had been through hell and back. There were bags under his eyes and if you think they're bad normally, they looked like there were ten-ton suitcases under there. You know that he had really been hitting mileage.

Well, right after that the President came in, in his raincoat and that hat, and everybody began to applaud. All the staff was out there. And he came over to each one and shook their hand and thanked them. Then he came over to me, I remember, and he said, "Larry, I really want to thank you for keeping me informed. The daily bulletins were really [good], I really felt that I was back here. I want to thank you." And he had remembered to say that. You know he'd done a lot of things during that, but it was an indication of the fact that he remembered at that moment, in his state of exhaustion, to thank us for that.

F: Did he come back from the trip like that looking refreshed or did it wear on him, too? I can see where everybody else got dead.

Levinson -- V -- 44

L: I would say this, he was pretty tired that night. You remember this was the culmination of quite an extensive trip. Certainly the look, the difference, between Jake and the President was like day and night.

But to know that out of all the things on his mind and the many things that had happened to him on the trip, and the crowds that had met him in Australia and meetings of the chiefs of the specific countries, to have remembered these daily bulletins which maybe he saw before he went to sleep or glanced at in a spare moment, and to think enough to thank me for doing it.

F: Did you try to coordinate them with their hours down there, or did you just send them out?

L: We just sent them out. We said, "Today is November 2, 1967 in Washington" so they would know what the date was, and "This is the sum-up of activities of events during this day. Category One, 'In the Government.' Joe Barr says such and such, Bob Weaver says such and such." Whatever it was. The Situation Room had those transmitted out. I assume somewhere in the Archives hopefully these daily messages still exist. I'm sure they do in the papers.

The other matter that I just wanted to dwell on: I began this with really the end of how I left, but how I got there and my first meeting with the President, my first sight of the President is even another interesting story unto itself. Remember that I came from the world of the Pentagon legal department where the rest of the government was a huge mystery to me. In fact, when you are in the Pentagon you tend, as big as it is, to be insular and you deal with an organization that is itself as big as the rest of the

Levinson -- V -- 45

government. So other than what you had read in the newspapers about things going on and pictures of other cabinet officers, it was an alien world.

F: The outside world is really kind of unreal, isn't it?

L: That's right. So when I got to the White House, one of the first problems we had, and this was, I'd say, in July and August of 1965, was the famous problem of the Northeast drought, where because of the combination of lack of rainfall and other things, mainly the lack of rainfall, I guess, or maybe not having a heavy winter where the snows ran off sufficiently. The combination of climatological factors had caused the Northeast to suffer from something that the Southwest had been used to. But the fact that it was happening in big cities where people were told, "You can't turn your water tap on from two to four in the afternoon," or began to ration water, began to get to be a national problem.

F: Worse for its shock affect on people who weren't used to it.

L: Right. Aside from another episode, which was the great power blackout which occurred a little bit later, which is another story unto itself, the water shortage in the Northeast sparked us off in the following way: Senator Robert Kennedy in a very vigorous speech in the Congress blasted the Secretary of the Interior for not doing enough to help the localities to meet this terrible problem. That was duly recorded on the AP ticker, which obviously sped by the President's eyes ten o'clock one morning.

Within moments Joe Califano, who had not been there for more than a week, disappeared from view and later came back breathlessly saying "Got to get everybody in the government in together. We've got to do something about this water crisis."

Levinson -- V -- 46

Remember now, this was maybe my third day in the White House. We were down in the basement then in our temporary office, which later turned out to be George Reedy's office later on and Kintner's office before that. It was that wood-paneled office that used to be the whirlpool health club when Kennedy was there. So Joe said, "We've got to get everybody in together. We've got to get a program, too, to help solve this problem." So he said, "At eleven o'clock here are the people we're going to bring in." He had Secretary Udall, the Chief of Engineers, the Secretary of the Army, the head of the Bureau of the Budget, and so forth. So I made the calls and there I was. I had seen Udall as a face in the newspapers and no more than that. A few minutes later bustling in was a man that I regarded with a great sense of awe, the Secretary of the Interior. Then before long came in the Director of the Budget, Charlie Schultze, I guess at that time, yes. Then came two-star General [W. F.] Cassidy from the Corps of Engineers, and so forth. We all sat around the table and Joe began by saying, without ever referring, by the way, to the Bobby Kennedy speech, "The President feels very deeply that the government is not doing enough to help the governors, and he wants a program developed by two o'clock. Then we are going to bring the governors in tomorrow."

F: What time of day was this?

L: This was now about noon. Udall said, "Joe, we've been working on this, and we're working out agreements under the Delaware River Compact. We're going to ship water around from one basin to the next and we're not going to have this state drawn--we're working this out now."

Levinson -- V -- 47

Joe said, "What else can you do?" Well, they got their heads together and came up with a list of about ten things: number one, speed up construction of the Tocks River Dam; b) siphon water out of this place to another place; c)--and finally Joe came up with the idea, why don't we send crisis teams out to each of the big cities where the drought is the severest? You know, we will have a team of engineers, Bureau of the Budget; that's terrific.

So by two o'clock we had an action program worked out. Joe sent it into the President by memo saying, "I met with Udall, blah, blah, blah, and here's the program, ten things to do." And within the next day or so--I guess it was the next day--the President said, "Okay, I want the following people brought in as soon as possible: Governor Rockefeller; the Mayor of the city of New Jersey, [Hugh] Addonizio"--the President always had a tough time saying his name, I remember.

F: It wouldn't come naturally off his tongue.

L: "The Governor of Pennsylvania; the Governor of New Jersey"--Governor [Richard] Hughes, I think at that time--"Mayor of the City of New York"--[Robert] Wagner was still the mayor, I believe at that time; yes, summer of 1965. "Now I want New York congressmen; the New York senators; I want everybody in, and I want them all in one room and I want them briefed on this program. I want each person in the government to get up and tell them what we're going to do."

So the telegrams went out and this, for a tyro in the White House, was really something. Because the next day in the Fish Room, [Stanley] Resor, who was secretary of the army, then, I believe, began the meeting by saying, "I'm in charge of the civil

Levinson -- V -- 48

function of the Corps of Engineers and here is my program." Then Udall got up. While this was going on, had slipped in very quietly by the side door the President, listening to this.

I'd never seen the President. I'd come over really to help Joe on a temporary basis because I had worked on this, I was up in the Fish Room. The President walked in, sat himself very quietly down in an armchair. I looked at him for the first time. I'd seen this familiar face as he was. But there he was and the first impression, I'll never forget, was "Gosh, the man is big!" His sheer size filled in this chair and that by now familiar face was pretty awe-inspiring. And my job at that moment was a menial enough job. Because of the ways the doors were situated, with the press out in the lobby, the press bursting trying to get in, my job was to stand by the door and make sure the press didn't get in until the people had finished their briefing, because the President had something else in mind, which none of us knew about. And that was he was going to bring the governors into the Cabinet Room, then invite the press into the Cabinet Room, and make a statement. I don't think the governors even knew that. And sure enough, after Udall and everybody had finished briefing the delegation in the Fish Room, he said, "Now I'd like to have you all come into the Cabinet Room and we'll have the press come in." At that point Rockefeller said, "My God, it's going to be like a circus." I was sitting right next to him. That was my introduction to the White House.

So Joe, I think for me this is going to have to wrap it up for today. There are a number of other things I really did want to get into, such as XYZ.

F: We will.



Levinson -- V -- 49

L:        Maybe we'll do it again sometime.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview V

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION  
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of

LAWRENCE E. LEVINSON


In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Lawrence E. Levinson, do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all rights, title, and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of the personal interviews conducted with me on November 19, 1968 in Washington, D.C.; on March 18; in April, 1969; on May 13, 1969; on November 5, 1971; on August 18, 1972; and on November 2, 1973 in New York City, and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

- (1) The transcripts shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.
- (2) The tape recordings shall be available to researchers.
- (3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcripts and tapes.
- (4) Copies of the transcripts and the tape recordings may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.
- (5) Copies of the transcripts and the tape recordings may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

  
Donor

APRIL 17 2000  
Date

  
Archivist of the United States

5-18-00  
Date