INTERVIEW VI

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INTERVIEWER: Joe B. Frantz

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

Tape 1 of 1

F: Tell us about the grand life on the presidential yacht, the *Sequoia*.

L: Right. I was going to give you a summary of the experience that my wife and I had on the *Sequoia*. I can't pin the date down, although I would think it would be sometime after the Republican convention of 1968, and after President Johnson had had a meeting with President Nixon at the White House, generally discussing the situations in the world and domestically.

I was at the White House late one afternoon, I believe it was probably a Saturday afternoon at four o'clock, when the phone rang. It was either Jim Jones or Marvin [Watson] or somebody at the other end saying, "The President very much would like to have you join Lady Bird and other members of the staff and himself on the *Sequoia*."

Now for me this was a very exciting prospect, because in the two and a half years or three years that I had worked at the White House I had never been on the *Sequoia*, though we knew that the President had used the yacht very frequently to take congressmen on board, and to take other visiting state officials on board for a nice, relaxing cruise down the Potomac. So I said, "All right, Jim"--or Marvin, I can't remember now--"let me call my wife and see if she can get a baby sitter. By the way, can

I get a staff car to pick her up?" We lived in Alexandria, which wasn't terribly far from where the yacht was going to take off from.

F: Is it down in Anacostia?

L: Yes, in Anacostia somewhere. So I called my wife, and she was excited. We got a baby sitter, and a staff car went down to pick her up. I said I'd meet her at the dock, and I guess it was Anacostia. I came down directly from the White House, and she joined me on the dock.

There we were, pulling up to the dock--we got there about the same time--and there was a naval officer, a CPO, very smartly dressed, giving the salute. We got on the yacht and [were] there just looking around--the President had not arrived there yet; we had gotten there a few minutes early--to see some familiar faces. We noticed Simon McHugh, Vicky McCammon McHugh, and some of the military aides, and before long Senator Jackson came on board and Senator Gale McGee came on board. Then a little bit after that the President came in, I believe by car, with Mrs. Johnson. He got on the yacht, and we shoved off.

F: Do they pack on board, or was there a ceremony?

L: Not really, he just kind of got on with those ten-league steps and got on board, and we got underway. I think Liz Carpenter was there, I'm not sure about that. But in any event we shoved off and noticed as we looked around that there were a few little boats trailing us, namely Secret Service in their own little small power boats that always kind of protected around the *Sequoia*, as we went off. I was looking around the yacht; we had read about it, seen pictures of it. It wasn't what I would call an extravagant yacht at all.

It was, I'd have to say, a basic workman-like type boat with not a lot of fancy things all over it, but just a good solid yacht.

We started going down. Normally these cruises would take you from Anacostia up the Potomac under the Wilson Bridge, and up around Mount Vernon, and then kind of wait around Mount Vernon a little bit, swing around and come back under the bridge and then go back into Washington. So we got on, and we were having a nice time. The waiter came around with some drinks and there were *hors d'oeuvres*. It was really just a pleasant, relaxing Saturday evening. It was a lovely night, by the way. It started to get dark, and we went up on the topside of the deck where the cover had been taken off.

There was Scoop Jackson sitting there, and he was talking about the fact that he had just gotten back from Vietnam. One of the things that had impressed him most, I remember this very vividly now, is the tremendous work that was being done in terms of hospitalization and the construction of medical facilities, and the work that the army doctors were doing, not only for the American arms that were there, but for the Vietnamese population. He said, "We hear all these things about Vietnam and the terrible things that are going on there," but one of the points that he recognized, bright spots, was the fact that American medicine there had been so generous with its time and its talent for the whole population. They were giving vaccinations to kids, and they were giving basic health services to kids, and kind of running their own neighborhood health clinics. He thought that was a kind of interesting sidelight to our operations there, and a fact that the public had not known about. So he went on a little bit about that.

F: Let me intrude for one moment on a social note. Is one told what to wear about a presidential yacht, or does he just guess?

L: Well, I think you just guess.

F: Do you go in business suits and that sort of thing?

L: I came in on Saturday at the White House. We didn't really dress up, you know, in the way we dress up during the week. Normally in the White House, I'll have to say, the customary dress when you work there on a Saturday was a blazer and maybe some grey flannel slacks or something like that. But our whole dress on Saturday was much more informal. We were never always spiffied up the way we were during the week, but it was more sport-like and relaxed. I just went on with what I was wearing at the White House. Looking around at the people on the yacht, Scoop [Jackson], for example, was wearing a sport jacket, and I don't think he even had a tie on. Gale McGee did come on with a suit.

F: What did your wife wear?

L: Oh, golly, just a summer dress, or something like that.

So we had this discussion with Scoop, and then we went downstairs. I guess it was around supper time, and the supper was served buffet style, where the mess boys would go around. You'd get a plate, and they'd go around with trays and they'd put some food on your plate. You'd kind of sit there in this big room with your food on your knee.

Of course, the President was there and the conversation turned to Nixon at that point. Everybody was kind of gathered around, and he was talking about his meeting with Nixon in the Cabinet Room. I can't quite place the time; again, the date still eludes me. I thought it was a little bit after the Republican convention, I'm not sure. I think

somewhere between that time and the Democratic convention, but I just can't remember. But he was saying that Nixon, from the meetings that he had had with him, was a man of supreme confidence. He said that he had never seen Nixon, in all the years that he had known him before, so confident of where he was going and what he wanted to do, and how this election was going to be shaping up, and his confidence of being able to manage the domestic situation and manage the international situation. The President said, "I've never really seen him in such complete control of himself, with such confidence." He said he had spent some considerable time with him in the Cabinet Room, hearing Nixon talk about what he was going to do in his campaign strategy generally, not getting into the partisan political issues, but mainly trying to take Nixon's measure. I know he reported that around to the group, and there was a very interesting series of comments off that, [during] which somebody said, "Well, you're just kind of mad at Hubert Humphrey." And he said, "No, no, I'm not. This is the way I take it."

And what was interesting, I guess Bill White--not Bill White, but golly, what's the Washington Post fellow that used to write about the President all the time, the one who wrote *The Professional*?

F: Bartlett? Kilpatrick?

L: No. He wrote the book--Bill White; William White, not Teddy White.

F: Yes, William White.

L: But William White was on board, and I think Marianne Means was on board, too, because he'd take a collection of some of his favorite journalists to these things.

F: People who would keep things off the record.

L: Keep things off the record. This was kind of a nice get-together, and then the conversation, I remember, turned to Martin Luther King. It turned to what one has to do in this country to be a leader, the principle of leadership, the qualities of a leader--leader of a movement, leader of a party. The President I know went on at some length, talking about what he thought the qualities of leadership had to be. I guess we were getting around to a discussion of what charisma was.

He indicated that he thought that Martin Luther King, for whatever he might have thought about him, had charisma, in the sense of being able to communicate, to touch off, to electrify. He thought it was largely through his oratorical [skill]. Not the fact that Martin Luther King obviously was not an exceptionally pleasant person to look at, but the President was saying that he was one of the best spellbinders. He was the kind of a guy who could wrap up a church audience, and that kind of spellbinding oratory made him what he considered a leader. Then there was a discussion at that point, you know; is it a physical appearance? Is it the manner of speaking? What is charisma? This was the kind of conversation we had sitting in there.

I remember that after the dinner was over I walked up on top again, and we at that point started to turn around and were heading back to Washington. There was Gale McGee, sitting all by himself at the front end of the boat looking up at the stars. He said, "It sure is pretty here. It kind of reminds me a little bit of my home state, Wyoming. I look up at these stars. You know, sometimes it's just good for a man to get out here all by himself." McGee kind of detached himself, sitting there up in the front of the boat, just mulling some things over.

Then we started heading down, and suddenly the boat stopped. At that point the President said, "Well, I've got to go. I'm going to get off here." The boat pulled into the Alexandria Navy Yard, and everybody said, "Mr. President, where are you going?" And he said, "I'm going to a birthday party"--of one of the Mine Workers officials who was living in Alexandria. I can't remember the fellow's name now, but he was either head of the UMW after John L. Lewis or was the general counsel of the UMW, I can't remember. But he stopped the boat, it must have been about ten o'clock at night, and said, "I want you all to go on back. I'm going to stop off here and see my good friend." I can't remember what the fellow's name was, but he was with the UMW.

F: I may be able to pull it out in a minute, because he had an old friend from Texas days who heard him make his first political speech, who became the head of the UMW's pension fund. [Welly K. Hopkins]

L: Maybe that's who it was. I thought he might have been counsel of the UMW.

F: He's a lawyer and somewhere in there wound up as the [counsel]. In fact he preceded Johnson to Washington and was kind of an early sponsor.

L: He was an old friend. So Lady Bird and the President got off at that point, and the boat went on. I assume he must have come back in their. . . . Maybe the boat went back to pick him up, or what have you. But some people who wanted to get off at Alexandria, who lived close by, got off. We got off there too, and there was a staff car and they took us home. That was one experience I remember on the *Sequoia*.

Then I remember going on it another time, where we were working on the tax message. I'll have to say that this was probably now before the first trip. This was the

second trip I had made on the *Sequoia* [that I just spoke of]. I know I had gotten on the *Sequoia* before that, around August of 1967, I think almost a year before that [second trip] when we were working on this big message to increase the tax surcharge, or to impose a 10 per cent tax surcharge.

We had been working on the message all week long, and the President--now this was on a Friday night or maybe even a Saturday night--wanted to do some work on the message on the boat. He had drafts of the message with him. Valenti I think at that time had left the White House, and Califano called me and said, "The President wants to work on the message, and he wants to work on it on the boat. You show up at the dock at six o'clock or so, and you get on the boat. We'll be working on the messages together." So sure enough I got there at six o'clock.

This time there were not many people on the boat. Valenti was there, I remember, and we got up into one of the working rooms. Califano, myself, the President, Valenti, were all [there]; maybe Schultze was there, I can't remember. We were sitting around on chairs, and the waiter came over and wanted to know if we wanted anything to drink. I said, "Sure, scotch and soda," and I remember everybody was very relaxed--unlike the White House, where when you're sitting there working on a message with this air of formality, on the boat everybody kind of just unwound. We were working on the message, and you know, you have a scotch and you feel a little bit better. Maybe if you're just an aide to the President and you have a scotch, it makes you maybe a foot taller in your own mind, and you think you can argue a little bit more.

We were starting to talk about words. I guess the substance had pretty well been decided on. We were talking about words like "sacrifices" and "responsibilities," and I was making suggestions. The President had the master copy on his knee, and he was going over it with that big felt pen of his, scratching out words and changing things. Schultze was making his comments, and he said, "Jack, what do you think? Is this thing right? Does it sound right?" So we spent a good while working on the message, on the document.

After that was over the President appeared to be quite tired and a little drawn, I'd say. Marie [Fehmer] came over and said, "We'll have our dinner now, but the President's got to have some rest. He'll want to go below and sleep down below." I'd never been down below. I actually had to go to the bathroom, and I said, "Is there a bathroom downstairs?" One of the fellows said "Yes," and it gave me a chance to take a look at the sleeping quarters down below. I went in one of the bathrooms, and there walking down the lattice work into the bottom I went and took a look at some of the bedrooms, which are very nicely furnished, you know, with burnished wood and portholes and so forth. It wasn't, again, what I would have to call extravagant or a big rich yacht, but what I would have to call a yacht of state. So we came back up.

F: It was better than just a navy vehicle.

L: It was better than just a navy vehicle, but certainly by no means a pleasure yacht either. I think it was a functional, seagoing vessel, not sparse, but not elegant either.

The President said he was going to stay on board the yacht, sleep on the Potomac that night. We kind of got into a place where everybody got off, and he said, "I'm going

to go below now and try to get a good night's rest." And we got off the boat. So those are my two ventures on the *Sequoia*.

F: Does anyone besides the President use the yacht?

L: Yes. As a matter of fact, I remember one afternoon I got a call [around] maybe four o'clock from Secretary Fowler's wife, Trudye. She said the Secretary was going to have a birthday coming up very soon, and that she had had some discussions about maybe using the presidential yacht to invite some of the other cabinet members on board, and some of Secretary Fowler's banking friends, the Federal Reserve, and soon, and would the yacht be available? She mentioned to me that the Secretary had talked to the President and the President said, "You can have the yacht any time you want to." [He was in] kind of a very beneficent mood. So I said, "Well, Trudye, I don't schedule the yacht, but let me find out what the situation is. I think it's handled by the marine aide to the President."

So I called Marvin, and I said, "Marvin, Secretary Fowler wants to use the yacht to celebrate his birthday." And he said, "Now don't you know any better than that? You know this yacht is only supposed to be used by the President." He was telling me nobody could use it other than the President. So I said, "Well, I think the President already promised Secretary Fowler that he could have it any time he wanted to, and Mrs. Fowler is now picking us up on that." He said, "You just don't believe that." So I said, "All right, Marvin, very good. I just won't do anything."

Sure enough, about two days later Mrs. Fowler called me again and said, "What about the yacht?" I had hoped she had forgotten about it; I [hadn't] called her back. This is among one of the grandiose things we did at the White House. Sometimes you'd get

into these little interesting byplays of personalities like that. So she got very upset over the phone. I said, "I'm not sure that the yacht is going to be available." And she said, "The President promised Henry that he could have the yacht, and I don't want to disappoint him. Do you want me to call the President?" You know, she could get that way. I said, "Let me try it out."

So we went back again, and I think I talked to the naval aide. I said, "Look, I don't want to go around anybody's back around here, but this was promised." I believed Trudye Fowler. Sure enough, somehow word got to the President somewhere, and he said, "All right, you can make the yacht available." So that was certainly one instance, to help Joe [Henry] Fowler out, who had been working like crazy on this tax business, to celebrate his birthday on it, or maybe [he was] just recuperating from an operation. I can't remember what it was, but the yacht was made available to him.

I believe from time to time other cabinet members used it. This [the Fowler episode] was for a social purpose, but primarily the President felt that the yacht, like the White House, ought to be used to help get his programs through. The yacht is an instrument, [as] where he said, "You can get some fellows on that yacht at night and get them away from Washington, and you get a couple of gin and tonics into them and a couple of scotches and soda, and by gosh you treat them right on the yacht and they'll give you anything you want. You just butter up to them and you treat them right, and I want that yacht to be used to get my programs through."

And sure enough, I know that John Gardner, for example, took a group of people out on the yacht. I know that Secretary McNamara from time to time may have used it.

But like so many other pulpits that the President would speak from about his programs, so many of the things that he would use--the Ranch for example, the Air Force One, for example; he used the time of flight on the airplane to take people with him when he was going somewhere--so, too, was the *Sequoia* used as a place to get people away from their office. He used to always tell us that people are a lot different when they put on a sport shirt and try to relax and not get up this old stuffed shirt business. We were supposed to encourage, where we could, the use of that yacht and get those programs through.

F: He was a great believer in the importance of timing and place and things like that for working on people, wasn't he?

L: Yes. I would say looking back there wasn't a moment during the day when he wasn't thinking about how, when and where to exploit the use of a facility, be it even making a limousine available, or taking a ride somewhere, or getting on the boat, or going on the airplanes, or what have you, to try to move his programs along. I'd say the yacht got to really kind of be a seagoing arm of the White House. Because I think the President found also getting on board on a Friday, getting on the river, was just kind of a relaxing change of pace way of getting away.

F: He never really stayed overnight though, did he?

L: Well, he did. As I mentioned to you before, the night we worked on the tax message when he was so tired, he did stay overnight that way.

F: I see.

L: It was very interesting. Because sometimes when he was on the yacht and we were at the White House, the communications were very tricky. Because we would have to get to

the Secret Service when we needed to talk to him. There wasn't a teletype, I don't think, on the yacht. The way we'd have to do it is, we'd have to get a message relayed from the Secret Service on the dock to the Secret Service on the boat following the President. The Secret Service would then go to the Secret Service guy in charge who was on the yacht, maybe Bob Taylor from time to time, and he then relayed the message to the President, or to Jim Jones, or whoever else was on there. In other words, we had a little bit of a problem since we didn't have the teletype, the ticker, on that yacht to get messages across to him.

F: From newspaper accounts, Nixon makes tremendous use of Camp David, and I know Johnson did some. But Camp David was not nearly as intensively used or enjoyed. I suppose the Ranch formed a sort of an alternative to Camp David.

L: I would say that. I would say absolutely that to my knowledge I remember the President was at Camp David very, very few times.

F: Did you ever go?

L: No, I never did go, and I have a feeling that most of the staff never went either. I do recall Rostow was out there once with the President. This might have been at the time of deciding whether or not, right after Tet, to mobilize the [National] Guard, call up reserves. There were a series of very, very intense meetings which went out of the White House, went up to Camp David. And I recall a Sunday--that's right, it must have been right around the time of the Super Bowl. I definitely remember it now, because we had a little television set upstairs in one of the press offices, and I think out of one corner of my eye I was watching either Oakland or Green Bay up on this little television set. I had

Rostow on the line, who was up at Camp David. I figured I'd at least get a quarter of watching, and he called in. The President wanted something and had asked him to call me, and they found me in one of these little press offices. I remember talking to Walt, and I said, "Walt, whatever you want I'll put it on the teletype to you." And I went down to the Situation Room,and we got it off that way.

But other than that one episode, I don't recall whether [President Johnson used Camp David]. Well, for example, when we were briefing the President on the domestic programs--Nixon uses a lot of Camp David today to work on his domestic program and policies--on no occasion do I remember when we made our presentations domestically, on the domestic programs, did we ever go to Camp David, in the three or four presentations that we made. I know that we did three of them at the Ranch. That's where he really preferred to have a presentation made.

F: When you worked on these things at the Ranch, did you tend to use his office there, or did you work sort of individually? Was there something like a staff room?

L: The physical layout of the Ranch was something like this, to give you a typical working two or three days down there. We would fly in. If we hadn't gone down to the Ranch with the President, we'd come down by aircraft and go right into the strip. It was a small enough airplane. And normally that's what did happen, we could get in with smaller aircraft. And more chances than not, when we got in he would be there, would be out in a few minutes with his big white Lincoln, that four-door Lincoln. He'd be behind the wheel, and we'd get off. He'd greet everybody, and we'd get into the Lincoln, pile into the back. Even before we had a chance to do anything, he'd say, "I was just about to go

and take a little ride, and I guess you fellows want to come along with me." Of course we said, "Yes, Mr. President."

F: How many times have you toured the Ranch? (Laughter)

L: He'd get in there, and we'd start going around with this thing. There would be a car up in front of us to open up the gates, and there'd be another car behind us, and there'd be a Secret Service guy near each one of these gates as we went through. I remember some of the gates would open automatically. When the car would go over a treadle it would actually lift the gate. Others you would have to have somebody manually operate the gate. I would say, to give you a prototype, we'd spend a good hour or so riding around the Ranch, usually once, watching the gazelles leap across the pasture and so forth. The President more often than not would get out somewhere along the line and go over and take a look at a log, or take a look the way the crop was coming up, or complain about, "There isn't enough water here," or take a look at one of the animals and so forth. We usually would occupy the morning doing that somehow. Then we'd swing back to the Ranch where we would get back, and then I guess it was kind of time for lunch.

The way the President had it set up, you remember, he had a big working office in the Ranch itself, with a fireplace and with, I recall, a television set mounted up on top of that fireplace. He had his big desk up in this working room, which was lined with bookcases behind the desk. There was another desk for a secretary, possibly two desks for secretaries in there, and it was a paneled room, as I recall, with some paintings around it. But it was a very functional working office; it wasn't an opulent, extravagant office. I

think he had a flag or two in there to give it a little bit of stature, and there was the presidential seal. But to me it looked like the working office of any ranch.

F: Very airy and light.

L: Airy and light, right. It adjoined immediately a very large dining room--not a large dining room, but a dining room with a large picture window that had been put in where you kind of look out and look over Texas country. It was very, very pleasant.

We would work in the office itself, which had all the telephone lines in and so forth. Toward the end of his administration he had, I think, done some renovation of part of the ranch house, where he had built a little study for himself, which was not too much unlike the little green office he had off the Oval Room. This was, I recall, painted yellow, with a lot of books, bookcases again, and a couple of nice easy chairs. I know we made one presentation of a domestic program in that little yellow room. I think that was very much toward the end.

On another occasion, as I think I may have repeated earlier, we went outside and were actually sitting on the Pedernales in the afternoon, with a bunch of chairs drawn around us and sipping I guess it was Coors beer--Pearl beer, I guess; it was so good.

He had in addition to that a guest house, which was off a little way, where I stayed for a couple days with my wife when we were down there in August of 1968, which was fully equipped, had a television set, and was very, very pleasant, a nice furnished guest house. Dr. [George] Burkley and the Secret Service staff would kind of be off in their own little prefab, I guess, almost immediately adjacent to the ranch house, whereas the guest house was a nice walk away, a good twenty-minute walk.

In working at the Ranch, the office was very utilitarian. Again, the newspapers were piled up, there was all of his mail laid out on his desk to sign. It wasn't, as I say, a fancy office at all, again, when you think of the way the President conducted himself.

I went back to the White House, just interestingly enough, I was there two weeks ago and did have occasion to walk through again the grounds that we had vacated. I would say that I felt that I was on another planet, because the White House now has been so fixed up and so changed, with an elegance of history and style to it, with thickly carpeted rugs throughout. The lobby now has been converted into something that is quite serene, whereas before it used to be this big, wide, open, hot place. And during the summertime I remember the newspaper guys sitting there in these leather chairs and couches waiting for the afternoon briefing, sprawled all over the place, you know. It was quite a sight, to see these guys.

F: I was there about a year ago, I guess, or a little more, the only time I've been back. I didn't get through too much of it, but I was struck by the fact that those paintings that used to be in the waiting foyer where you came in from the little boulevard there, the White House boulevard--

L: Right. The road between the Executive Office Building and the White House, yes.

F: That's Executive Boulevard, isn't it?

L: Yes, Executive Boulevard. I think it's called Madison Boulevard or something like that.

F: But anyway, there had been various kinds of paintings there, sometimes western, sometimes modern. And it had all been taken down and had been replaced with pictures of the Nixon family in various poses.

L: Yes. Looking around at the White House today. . . . I looked into the Oval Room, by the way, since President Nixon was at Camp David for that evening. I was just contrasting in my own mind the difference between the Oval Room as President Johnson had lived in it, and the Oval Room as President Nixon lives and works in it. President Johnson had these three large ticker tape machines, or two of them rather, a big bank that occupied one corner near his desk. He had the presidential papers in the bookcases surrounding--they were kind of built into the walls of the Oval Room, that is, the papers of Truman and Eisenhower and Kennedy. Now instead of the presidential papers--President Nixon must be a bird lover of sorts--there are large replicas of birds in these little nooks and crannies.

I looked around, and I wanted to see whether or not, obviously, the Roosevelt portrait, the Shoumatoff portrait of Roosevelt was still there. It was as you remember hanging over the fireplace. I looked through the door, and there instead of Roosevelt, taken down for [obvious] reasons I'm sure, was a picture of George Washington or James Madison or somebody. The White House now seems to be steeped with a lot more colonial history, the Founding Fathers-type decorations and pictures. You get the feeling of early Americana in the White House under Nixon, whereas under LBJ we had the Remingtons, you recall, and a little taste of the West, and lately the bluebonnet pictures and so forth.

I can't help in thinking, now that I have to remark, on the utilitarian nature of President Johnson. He certainly would not go in for fancy things; the White House in the Johnson days was certainly not a fancy place.

F: This was where he lived.

L: Right. It's where he lived. Of course, the elegance of the White House is there, the Lincoln Room and so forth over in the living quarters, but let's talk really about where people work most of the time. I don't remember the place ever being painted while I was there. We always had good maintenance crews to clean up everything, but there was still an air of--I guess he didn't really do much except a little bit of construction maybe down in the basement. He pretty much kept it, took it the way Kennedy had it, and except for shifting a couple of paintings around to give it an air of Remington and the wild west and so forth, didn't really do much with it. In other words, whereas Nixon came in and totally remodeled and redecorated and went in for a lot more ceremony and pomp, President Johnson pretty much kept the White House the way he got it.

F: He moved in and went to work.

L: He went in and went to work. And when you look around and you think about the Ranch, [which] is certainly by no means opulent, it was comfortable, livable, it was anything one would want in terms of material comforts.

I must tell you a very interesting [story]. The President somehow, if I can get into this for a minute, loved bathrooms. He loved bathrooms that were big. He loved bathrooms that had a lot of tile in them. I'm not saying that he preferred a Roman bath or saturnalia like that, but he liked a very utilitarian bathroom.

F: No San Simeon.

L: No San Simeon, but very utilitarian. I remember when we walked through the Ranch, when he had finished the remodeling of that wing, he proudly took us into his new

bathroom. He said, "Now here's the way, fellows, you really ought to have a bathroom built in your own homes. Come here, I want to show you this shower." We came over, and he said, "Now let me turn this thing on." And he turned this thing on, and I must say that water came out of the shower head like a laser beam. That was really powerful. He said, "There's nothing like getting in here for one of these showers; it will really wake you up. I can adjust this to any kind of speed." He was playing around with this thing and the shower would really bang out at you. Then he said, "Come over here. No man should really shave without one of these magnifying mirrors. I learned to really get a close shave, and I've sometimes got a heavy beard here. I want to get every hair out of every pore. You come on up here, Larry, you look over here. Did you shave this morning?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Well, you didn't do a very good job, because now look at that over there." He's pulling my face like this, and I was looking at this mirror that blows your face up about eight times. And he said, "Now if you had one of these mirrors in your bathroom--you tell your wife to go ahead and buy one of these. They don't cost very much. On your salary you can afford it." So that was our tour of the bath-room.

But to get back to the theme of the President's living quarters, the physical quarters that he would occupy, the quarters the staff would occupy, you find that current running all the way through. You see it going through the staff offices at the White House, which were very basic except for some of the paneled offices downstairs, which I think were done by Kennedy, although I'm not sure. Maybe we had put some in, but everything was done with an air not toward showiness, not toward extravagance.

F: They would have made a lot of corporate offices just look plain magnificent by contrast.

L: Right, right.

F: The White House wasn't in their class.

L: Yes. I'm not trying to tell you that we lived poor. I'm saying that we lived very simply, frugally, but with what we needed to get the job done. There were no frills; there was nothing fancy. You look at the *Sequoia*, the way that was fitted out, and you look at the President's own office down at the Ranch, and you look at the other places that we worked [in]. They all kind of followed [the attitude that], "We're not going to put a lot of money into these things. We're not going to take the taxpayers' money and build these little castles for you staff fellows. Working here is enough of an experience, and we're not going to be extravagant. We'll be a model of frugality." Of course, obviously this extended to the famous light-turning-off situation and to our whole way of life. I think the President always said, "You're being supported here by the taxpayers, and you're going to give them a dollars' worth of work"--of course we probably gave them two dollars' worth of work for every dollar put into us, but that's just the way he was. That carried through to the whole physical setting of where we worked.

I remember this. This is very interesting. I came into the White House and we asked where John Ehrlichman was. They said, "He's out playing tennis on the White House courts." I said, "That's just fantastic. I'm glad to see they're getting some use." Then I thought back to the days where those tennis courts were kept in mint condition, because there wasn't a staff member of the White House that was allowed to set foot on

them. I think the feeling was that we didn't have time to play tennis. "We're busy working and we're not going to show somebody looking through the gate"--

F: I would have loved to have seen the reaction if he'd have said, "Where's Levinson?" And someone said, "Well, he's out playing tennis."

L: Down at the tennis courts, right, exactly! I would say this, the President's dogs, you recall, were kept in these rather large penned-in kennels right behind the office that Mildred Stegall used to sit in. I always used to get the feeling somehow, maybe in some of the dark, desperate hours of the day when you were exhausted and tired and you felt, "Gee whiz, nobody appreciates me," that somehow the dogs at the White House were getting a hell of a lot better treatment than the staff were. But I guess those were feelings that--

F: Did the dogs ever cause any problems?

L: Well, let's say they were always around there yapping. I guess the windows were secure enough where you could look out. It was very interesting. On a nice afternoon you'd look out, and you'd see the dogs romping around and having a wonderful time and jumping up and down, just being free as the air, really, on a wonderful Washington afternoon. And here we were looking out.

I remember one particular meeting we had with a group of maybe thirty people, including Howard Samuels, who was then under secretary of commerce. We were talking about some of the Commerce Department legislative programs for that year. It was getting late in the afternoon, and it was like the five o'clock twilight coming down. Then everybody's face gets an undue pallor of extra white at that point. We were sitting

there trying to figure out, "Are we going to have some special programs to rebuild the docks of major cities, with the dock areas and the port facilities being used maybe for housing, or maybe cleaning up the port facilities?" Because Samuels' point was that a whole physical plant, as far as Merchant Marine docking was concerned and passenger liner docking, was outmoded, and we wanted to really clean up the wharves of the city of New York and so forth.

I remember we were sitting in there, and I looked out the window. There these dogs were carousing and romping out on the lawn and having a wonderful time. I guess they had just finished getting fed, and we were all getting a little hungry, knowing that there was really no place for us to eat. We would have to go down to the vending machine and hope maybe the guards hadn't come there first and gotten the best bologna sandwiches, and you didn't want to end up with lettuce and tomato. So that I say the frugality extended even to the dining, to how we'd eat at night. We'd have, as you will recall, very long hours, to say the least. And oh, around six or six-thirty you'd start to feel those hunger pains. You'd been drinking a lot of coffee during the day. Then you'd go downstairs to this little room right off the basement entrance, and there was a sandwich vending machine and cigar vending machine and a milk machine, which was always out, and an ice cream machine. It had a little infrared heater where you could put a quarter in and get some hot dogs, and you'd shove it in the heater and so forth.

I remember saying, "Gee, here we are working at the White House, six and seven o'clock at night," and you want to go down and you're hungry and all that. You know you're not going to get home until eleven o'clock, and you sit there and just hope that

you'll beat the guard shift down there before they'd take out all the cream of the crop of the sandwiches.

We didn't have the dining room and the mess open at night. I guess somebody had made a judgment that we'd either be home eating dinner at night, or we'd [make] do with the machine or something like that. But more often than not, I'll have to say, when the President was in and he'd have dinner, he'd invite people over there with him. So sometimes you'd get a sandwich at six-thirty. You didn't want to eat too much, because you felt if you got an invitation at eleven o'clock you'd be eating beefsteak. You didn't want to go up there full and be just sitting around there. At least if you'd eat, you'd be taking up the time.

I guess our discussion on the *Sequoia* really fitted into the whole physical ambience of the White House, as contrasted with the way the White House is today, the way it is now. I'd say [it was] functional, frugal, workmanlike, and very much in keeping with the way the President, I think, himself felt about the White House.

F: On some very special or tense occasions when you knew it was going to be a kind of an around-the-clock operation, did the President ever order the White House mess open in the evening? He did I know once in a while on some kind of little social occasion.

L: I don't know whether I ever got into the story with you of the Spanish-American meetings, the meetings with the Chicanos in the White House, which you now lead me to recollect. I would say somewhere in mid-1967 Jake Jacobsen came down to see me and said that they had just gotten a telegram from a group of Mexican-American leaders, saying that they were getting fed up with the way the Johnson Administration was

handling the Chicanos and the Mexican-Americans. There weren't any Mexican-Americans in the government in any decent positions, and they were demanding their rights. Everybody was black-oriented in this administration. They forgot that the poor browns and the Chicanos also had a stake here. Jake came down and said, "Here's this telegram. You've got to do something about it." I said, "All right, I don't really know much about it, but let's see if we can get into this a little bit."

Things led to other things, and eventually this resulted in a dinner where we would bring into the White House, for the first time, all of the leaders of the Mexican-American groups in the country, most of whom had never been near Washington in their lives. The President, as you know, had an affinity [for] and had historical roots with the Mexican-Americans, having taught them and having grown up in a country where Mexican-Americans were in abundance. And he, through Harry McPherson and myself, said, "Bring them in, bring them into the White House. I'm going to really show them we care. I'm going to invite them in for dinner, and we're going to really do this up right." The President had a very good friend in Austin or somewhere, Dr. Hector Garcia.

F: In Corpus Christi.

L: In Corpus Christi. He had some relationship with Hector Garcia. Well, in working through Garcia--

F: In fact, I think he named him to the Human Rights--

L: Human Rights of the United Nations, right. Working through Garcia, we developed a list of the leaders of Mexican-American organizations. They came out to be names of a

furniture salesman out on the West Coast, and another fellow ran a little barber shop somewhere else. We were amazed to see that unlike the Negro movement at that juncture, how splintered and fragmented the Mexican-American groups were. They were weird groups and subgroups; there was really no one entity, one individual that you could go to, or two or three. There were just a lot of them, a lot of leaders.

F: I've had that problem several times trying to get one or two or three spokesmen in, and it is just a tedious, impossible job, because there are almost as many organizations as there are people.

L: Exactly. So we prepared a list of the top Mexican-American leaders, maybe fifteen to twenty in all. Marvin said, "Well, you can use the dining room. We're going to bring them in. We're not sure the President's going to appear, but Levinson, you've got the responsibility, and you better make sure these Mexican-Americans are all here." So we had a menu, by the way which I approved, which was steak. The mess really did well on these special occasions. We had the whole mess organized, and telegrams went out and everybody accepted. Some fellows called and said, "We don't have the plane fare. What do we do?" I said, "You just lay out the money, and we'll reimburse you when you get back." One fellow I remember called me at twelve o'clock at night saying, "I don't have the plane fare. I can't come in." I said, "You tell me where you are, and we'll wire you out some money." And I had Bill Hopkins send him out a voucher and wire him out some money.

The great night came when the Mexican-Americans were all to come into the White House. We had a half dozen staff members ready, and we went down to the mess.

It was about seven o'clock at night, and we were waiting, and waiting, and waiting, and suddenly a few Mexican-Americans began to drift in. Then we discovered to our horror, almost a half an hour before the President was to arrive--he said he would drop in around eight o'clock--that there was a tremendous argument going on in one of the hotel rooms in Washington between two cliques, both saying, "If you don't do it my way, we're not going to show up for the President's dinner."

What we had at seven-thirty was something like on the order of seven or eight staff members and three Mexican-Americans. I was just saying it was one of those great sinking moments of life, where the President would walk in at eight o'clock, expecting to be surrounded with "Viva Johnson," and see only three Mexican-Americans with the abundance of the staff. I could just see him saying, "I didn't come down here to see you fellows, I see you all day long. And now you can't even set up a simple dinner like this. How do you expect to run the country?"

Meanwhile, I got on the phone. We had assigned somebody from the Labor Department to act as liaison with the Mexican-American group. He was the one who had called back--I guess his name was David North; Bill Wirtz had picked him--saying, "It's impossible, they won't show up. They're fighting down at the hotel room, and they won't go." I said, "You better get them over here. Because if they are not over here in fifteen minutes, I'm going to send three staff cars out there, two staff cars, and they're never going to set foot in the White House again. I'm going to tell you, this is going to be a black day in history for Mexican-Americans if they can't argue this thing out."

So I'm sitting there biting my fingernails, and sure enough the whole group arrived about eight o'clock. Everybody was friendly, and there was a big happy occasion. Then before long, a quarter after eight, Jones called me and said, "The President's coming down. Are they there?" And I said, "Yes, they're all here." He said, "All right, the President's coming down." I said, "Gentlemen, the President will be here in a few minutes." My appetite by then had gone. He came down and he introduced himself to everybody, and they were having a nice handshake. For most of these fellows who had never been in Washington, had never been in the White House, this was a tremendous eye opener. So we sat around in groups of tables. They served the steak. I remember I had no appetite that night [because of] what I had been through in figuring out if the President had showed up with seven staff members and three Mexicans. It would have been . . . . So the thing went off, and it was a very interesting discussion.

The President did talk about what he was doing in the area of health, and education, and manpower and poverty, and that he had felt very deeply concerned about the Mexican-Americans. He gave a very impassioned statement of where he stood, the things he was trying to do. After we finished dinner he said, "I want to invite you all to come over with me to go see some movies over at the White House, the Mansion. I want to go over there." So we went over there, and we went into the theater first. By now some of these fellows were exhausted from just the absolute awe of being in the White House, and having a couple of drinks, and things like that. Little did they expect later they'd be sitting there watching films of the President's trip throughout Asia, where, you know, the monthly films would come in. They saw those, and then after that was over he

invited them all over to the Mansion for kind of a nightcap. By that time these fellows were all dancing.

F: Where did they go, upstairs?

L: They went upstairs. Remember now, we brought a furniture salesman who didn't have enough money to buy his ticket.

So when you ask me about the use of the mess, sure, that was one occasion, obviously, where we used it at night. Where we would have briefings on the legislative program, we'd have Secretary Udall, for example, talking about the Interior Department programs; we'd have a six o'clock cocktail and a buffet in the dining room downstairs. So those were the occasions on which we used those dining rooms.

F: One question I wanted to ask you on this matter of presentation technique, regardless of where you made it. Who decided who made the presentation? Was there a logical person who made it? Did just one person make it? Did the President listen to you uninterrupted, or did you practically go syllable by syllable?

L: I'd say that in most of these presentations Califano would set the stage and would then turn it over. Califano would put it in the presidential perspective. In other words, he would say, "This is what we're doing here in pollution control. Don't look at it solely as pollution control, but look at it as improving the quality of everybody's lives. This fits into making sure that consumers aren't--well, it fits into the whole spectrum of the quality of life." Whereas the cabinet guy would come in and he would talk about his own program, his own slice of it.

F: Yes, pretty narrow.

L: I would say that in these presentations to the leadership and to the committee leaders, where we were giving the previews of what we were going to be sending up, the President did very little interrupting, very little talking. He would really let the show be run by Joe [Califano] as the kind of master of ceremonies, and by the cabinet officials themselves. He wouldn't say very much, except occasionally he would ask prodding questions, but not very, very often. My experience was that he gave free rein to the cabinet officers.

F: Now, when you had made the presentation, then did you sort of chew it up and digest it and indigest it and so forth, or did you say a few perfunctory things and quit and go to work on it?

L: Well, normally the way we'd do it, we'd take, for example, pollution control programs for a given instance. Let's say in the Water Restoration Act, where we were trying to deal with the problem of pollution on the water basin basis, which meant a lot of state line reorganizations for pollution control purposes. We would pretty much have winnowed down the material. We pretty much would have a program of "a,b,c,d,e." We would give the program to Stu Udall. Udall would agree. This was normally already thrashed out by the time he got it, and he would go along with it. The presentation was made, and the President more [likely] than not would say, "I hope you fellows who have got committee responsibility for this on the Public Works Committee and Interior committees now would please promptly schedule hearings on these matters. Secretary Udall is ready to appear. He'll be up there next Monday at eight o'clock if you need him, and he's got his

staff all ready to go." The President would talk this way: "I wish you would give these pollution matters very careful consideration as committee chairmen."

In other words, he would talk to them at the end of these briefings as if he were back as the senate majority leader in just this way: "I wish you would give these matters your prompt attention. They are very important matters for the American people. We have done our job in developing the programs, and we are sending up the legislation in the form of bills. You will be getting my message, and I just wish you would have Secretary Udall up there at eight o'clock on Monday morning. He's raring to go, aren't you, Stu?" "Yes, sir, Mr. President, ready to go." "We have all our witnesses lined up, and I would hope that you, as committee chairman, would move these programs along." That's the way he would talk.

F: Monday comes and the chairman doesn't schedule the hearing, maybe several days or several Mondays go by. Were you supposed to remain alert and ask the congressmen, "When are you going to have those hearings?" and do a sort of follow through on that?

L: Right. What we had normally was a schedule, and I know that the files of the Johnson Library will contain these.

Before any program or any message would go up to the Congress we had to fill out a certification, certify a form, which I remember I spent a day or two developing. I think that students of the political process, in wanting to know the attention that the President spent and the details of the legislative process, would do well to ponder these forms. As I recall, the forms were two pages. And again, it was our certification and the

cabinet officers' certification that everything that needed to be done on the program was going to be done.

It would begin something like this. Item one: Secretary Udall has the responsibility for the Clean Waters Restoration Act of 1967. Item two: in pursuance of that responsibility: a) Secretary Udall has reviewed and concurred in the presidential message; b) the Interior Department staff, together with the Bureau of the Budget, has developed and has already perfected with Justice Department approval, the draft bill entitled "Clean Waters Restoration Act of 1967." Subcategory C, paragraph two: The briefing for the leadership on these programs has been set for Monday, such and such a date. Paragraph four: The attendees at this briefing are the following: committee chairman X, committee chairman Y. Five: A preliminary poll of the House committee indicates the following dispositions toward this program: a, b, c, d. Item six: Fred Panzer has alerted his staff to be prepared immediately upon the submission of the message to contact the following organizations with telegrams urging support of the message: Izaak Walton League, Sierra League, and so forth and so on. Item seven: Committee Chairman Blank has indicated that he would begin hearings on this bill on such and such a date, and soon.

[We would] lay out a whole series of programs. Then we would say, "Therefore, Mr. President, all steps necessary for the submission of the message have been taken and we urge you to approve it." And then I'd sign it, Califano would sign it, or Udall would sign it. This is the way he would have everybody nailed down.

Now if the committee chairman didn't schedule the hearings when he said he would, and this was not a perfect process by any means. I think as I recall we had a big flow chart where all the legislation was. We would say "items submitted," "committee hearings scheduled," and if there was a break in the chart we would get to O'Brien, or Manatos, or Wilson, or Barefoot Sanders later and say, "Hey, how's this thing coming along?" And he'd say, "Let me get hold of the chairman."

At no instance were we ever put in the position of delaying legislation for want of administration witnesses or administration-prepared legislation. Those were always ready. If there was any delay it was going to be up on the Hill. The President would never put us in the position of having the committee chairman say, "Mr. President, I can't hold hearings on this. I don't even have a bill yet," or "I don't have a message yet," or "I don't have even a list of witnesses yet." So we avoided that. If you look at the way we compressed the legislative process in getting most of our bills up in February, March, and April, it was, looking back, a herculean job. Not just sending the message up, but also sending the legislation up, title by title. So we had the whole government mobilized for the legislation. The President had told us that he never wanted to hear from a committee chairman the fact that he was ready but we weren't.

F: This hasn't always been the case in other administrations.

L: That's correct. One of the things that certainly distinguishes the process of legislation in the Johnson days was his go-go philosophy, "Let's get everything up there; let's move; let's go." Now you might ask, in the compression do we make mistakes? Do we inadvertently do things whose consequences we couldn't foresee down the line? There

have been a lot of criticisms of the fact that the Great Society programs, somehow there were too many; they came too fast, weren't perfected; a lot of mistakes were made; a lot of money was wasted; they were overlapping; they were ineffective. The whole situation was a failure of the administration to really appreciate this and not listening to people like Mike Mansfield who said, "You've got too much passed already, Mr. President. Don't send any more up. Let us digest what we've got. Don't overinflate us."

That's a subject I think I would like to comment on, not today particularly, but one in which I hope the scholars of the future would dwell on, really try to find out was this really the case. Was there really too much, too soon? Or if there was too much too soon, was it all good, even though we did make mistakes? We did have a zig-zag pattern. Were we really trying to achieve perfection? Or were we really trying to do something else, which is to kind of capture a momentum and the consciousness and the spirit that there are tremendous inequities in the lives of people in this country, that these programs were designed, even in their imperfect way, to try to correct, and in our time and in our own day. We did things where we made mistakes, but on the other hand we had great glory, too. I think the record will show, looking back, that a tremendous start was made on the problems of this country in all these legislative proposals, like the crime proposals, the housing proposals, the health proposals, and the poverty proposals that were sent up.

F: I don't want to prolong this, because I know you have a lunch. But my estimate of the President on this, and he must have talked to you at some time since he did talk, is that he operated on the basis that, "Whether it can be funded, whether it can be digested, whether

I get everything I want accomplished with this act, if I can just get the act then I have moved one step forward in a larger program, and time will take care of it."

L: I think that's exactly correct. What we wanted to do was to put the foundations down. We never said in the time allotted to President Johnson that we could build a house. Our job was, "You can't build a house without a foundation." We wanted to put the foundation in place. We wanted to make it as strong as we could, but we wanted to build. If you look at the foundations that have been set up, in terms of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the poverty acts, and the Medicare proposals, and the national housing acts and so forth, those were the foundations that were put into place.

Now you could differ as to techniques. You can differ as to what kind of house you wanted to build; whether it was going to be a split-level, or a ranch house, or a town house, or what have you. The important thing was to get on and, "Let's go build a house, get the foundations in." That to me was the great triumph of the Johnson Administration's domestic programs, that he laid the foundations in for the follow-on to go ahead and build the house and to perfect the ultimate objective. Because everything that is being done today really is geared toward the same objective of removing inequities in the opportunities of life today in America. The foundations were really the necessary things to get done quickly.

F: Let me ask you one small detail. On that form you worked out, I presume in a sense he stood at your shoulder, figuratively, on that. He'd bounce it back to you with suggestions from time to time.

L: No, I don't think so. I think pretty much we knew what he was thinking of. I know that these forms exist in the treasure trove of the resources at the Library.

F: You just sat there and tried to figure out--

L: What it was he'd ask.

F: Is there any base there? Am I overlooking some--?

L: Yes. I think what we did was, we sent a memo to him saying, "Here's the form that I've developed, which we will attach to every message. Do you agree with the form? Yes? No? And he said, "Yes." That's the way we did it, I think.

F: It was always good when those "Yeses" came back, wasn't it?

L: Yes, that sure is. That's one of the ways he'd make your day. I must say, speaking of that, it was very interesting always to come back the next day and know that before long, when the mail would come around, when Juanita would get the night reading, that you would get your items back. There wasn't much of a time lag between the submission of an item and the return of it. I used to always go in in the morning with a great sense of expectancy. It was always very interesting to see your stuff. Either one of the porters would bring it back, or the messenger would bring it back, but the night reading would come back in those folders. That was one of the things I would always look forward to when I got up in the morning, frankly: how he would react.

F: I have a sense of wonder on that, with all he had to do, the fact that he did get everything done and back in such short order.

L: What was interesting about it, not only would he get it back in short order, but it would not always be a "Yes" or a "No." There would be at times a comment, sometimes

extremely humorous, sometimes self-deflating, sometimes just wonderfully humorous. For example, "Congratulations, you're now in grade two!" or something like that. I think, again, one of the great insights into the way the President worked is the way his reactions would be in his comments, these penciled comments on these memos sent him by the staff. They themselves, that is the reactions, would make a nice little book of quotations.

F: Yes, it would.

L: So, I guess that's about it.

F: That's it for today.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview VI

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