INTERVIEW I

DATE: June 11, 1975

INTERVIEWEE: MARSHALL MCNEIL

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Mr. McNeil's residence in Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: Mr. McNeil, let's start off with your background. You said you were born in San Antonio.

M: That's right.

G: And you grew up there, is that right?

M: Yes, and went to a school which I learned two months ago has now been destroyed--Brackenridge High School. Then I went on the Light there and then on the News. On the News I was an assistant sports editor. From there I went to Houston on the desk of the Press, which was a Scripps-Howard paper at that point. I finally became city editor of that paper.

G: What year was that, do you remember?

M: Oh, dear. That was 1922 or 1923, I have forgotten. Then I went from there to Pensacola. God, I have forgotten the man who owned those papers. He had two papers, and I was the managing editor of both of them. But I had been hired to be the managing editor of the Jacksonville Journal, which was owned by the same outfit. Then in January of 1930, the man who had been our editor at Houston, Chuck Lilly, had come to Washington as a correspondent for the Texas and Oklahoma and Alabama papers. They needed somebody here, and he was good

enough to arrange for me to come here. I came here as a correspondent in January of 1930 and was a correspondent for our three Texas papers--I'm sorry to say we only have one now--a paper in Alabama, one in Oklahoma, and two in Tennessee. That was a hell of a lot of work.

G: The three Texas papers were?

M: We had the Houston Press, the Fort Worth Press, and the El Paso Herald-Post. The Houston Press was sold and closed. The Fort Worth Press closed week before last; they shut it down. It hadn't made any money in God knows when. The El Paso Herald-Post is still running and is a damn good and profitable newspaper.

After being here for four years, I went down to our Knoxville paper as editor there, got fired, but came back here as correspondent. I had been managing editor of Our Alliance here before I left. So I came back here as a correspondent, and I have been here as a correspondent from 1930 to 1934 and from 1937 on until a few years back. I almost go back to the Fillmore Administration.

G: Do you recall the first time you met Lyndon Johnson?

M: Yes. Lyndon came in, what, 1933?

G: Well, he was working for Kleberg.

M: He came in 1933 as a clerk to Dick Kleberg, and while Kleberg was a big name and a big ranch, he wasn't much of a congressman. He finally got his ass kicked out, I think, because of kickbacks demanded of his help. But anyhow he never came back to Congress. Meanwhile, Lyndon had run for, I believe, the Buchanan [seat] and won that seat. But I met him first as a clerk to Kleberg, which

was I think in 1933, but I'm not sure.

G: Do you have any first impressions of him?

M: No, just a gangly kid doing his best to get along and pushing himself, as he always did, as much as he could. He was unmarried at the time and lived I think with Arthur Perry. It's too bad Arthur Perry's dead; he would be a good one [to interview].

G: Yes. I think we have interviewed him.

M: Did you get him before he died? That's fine. He lived with Arthur over at the old Dodge Hotel or somewhere and learned a hell of a lot about where the bodies were buried and how Washington operates, which is one of the things that made him a damn good congressman. He was a good congressman.

G: Did you have any contact with him when he became NYA director for Texas?

M: No, I didn't. Occasionally he would come up here, as I remember it, but I had almost no connection with him when he was with the National Youth Administration. He was not one of my congressmen. That is to say, we had no paper in Austin, and my contacts with him were never as great as they were with the congressmen from those particular cities, each of which had only one at that time. Nevertheless, he was a doer in his delegation. I learned to know him, and we became quite good friends. He was the kind of a guy who came to your house for dinner, and you went to his, and so forth. Our papers over the years, when he ran for the Senate, supported him. I am glad to say I had a hand in influencing them to that end. I've got a letter

somewhere thanking me for letting him win the election, whichever one it was. But Johnson wrote those kinds of letters to a lot of people.

After he became a senator--well, even before, when he was in the House and went to the wars, he came back, and I think I was the first newspapermen he saw. He had been at the Navy Department, and he called me down to lunch at what was then the old Powhatan, later the Raleigh and now gone. I remember his tales of his experiences out there and their giving him the Silver Star. He thought he didn't deserve it. I don't think he did, either. He got it for a flight, not for a fight. At the time he said, "Well, I'll never wear the thing," but when he became president I think it was always in his lapel.

G: Did he ever talk to you about his meeting with Douglas MacArthur there?

M: Yes, but I have no recollection of it that amounts to anything.

G: Did you cover in any way the 1941 race, the Senate campaign against W. Lee O'Daniel?

M: Yes, to a small extent. I didn't go there. What I did cover, it was from here, but I didn't go out. I went to Texas during the campaign, but I did nothing about covering it.

G: How about the year before, when he handled a lot of the congressional races for Democratic congressmen?

M: The what?

G: In 1940 he headed the campaigns for Democratic congressmen seeking re-election, raised funds for them, and sort of served as a central

campaign committee.

M: Are you meaning for the Texas delegation?

G: No.

M: For the campaign committee? I hadn't recalled that he was chairman or a member of that campaign committee.

G: Do you recall anything specific about his relations with President Roosevelt?

M: Yes, and particularly with Ickes. FDR was a fellow who enjoyed such brash young politicians as Lyndon. He had been in the NYA; he knew something about his operation. They became quite friendly. In fact, I think Lyndon's first announcement was on the White House steps. He was particularly friendly with Ickes. Ickes was able to use him, which he did, on oil and pipeline and such legislation as was important for the oil industry and for the country at that point.

G: Did LBJ benefit from this relationship?

M: Politically, yes, sure.

G: With Ickes?

M: Yes, sure. It was at that point, I think, that he came to know two men who helped him over the years and whom he helped to no end--Tommy Corcoran and Jim Rowe. By the way, have you got Jim Rowe? Have you got Corcoran?

G: Yes. They were both very good. It seems that unlike congressmen, he believed that the power was in the executive then and cultivated the executive.

M: At that point we had a strong executive. This was an executive

government, although thank God it was not an imperial presidency, such as we have recently gone through. But this changed when he became senator and the [majority] leader. It was congressional government then, and he and Sam [Rayburn] were the government. It's true that Eisenhower got some of the things he wanted by means of the veto, but what he got, he got because Lyndon and Sam let him have it.

G: Can you recall, for example, his role in the Big Inch pipeline?

M: Not exactly, no, except that it was the oil companies as much as anybody who were fighting the Big Inch. But everybody knew we had to have it. Lyndon was a member of what was then called the Naval Affairs Committee, as I recall. Old Carl Vinson was the chairman. With our ships being sunk along the east coast there was never any doubt about the necessity for the Big Inch, although there was a hell of a lot of to-do about it. But Ickes wanted it, Ickes knew it was needed, the Congress knew it was needed, and it was built.

G: Why did the oil companies oppose it?

M: I don't know that they opposed it, but they sure as hell didn't break a gut trying to get it over.

G: Was this more or less a fight between the independent oil producers and the major companies?

M: Not especially, no. I think that they thought they could get their oil here by tanker up in the east coast and by tank car. And then they had their own pipelines. What was the big one from Texas? I have forgotten the name of it. They would have preferred to have

built it themselves.

G: Anything else about his relations with Roosevelt?

M: No. I think you must have a complete fill-in on that, probably much better than I would know. The Old Man liked him, and the Old Man used him. He used the Old Man as much as he could to get what he could for Texas, and he got every damn thing he could think of. He used Ickes the same way and vice versa.

G: Ickes' under secretary was Alvin Wirtz.

M: That's right. That's right. I think he really got Alvin Wirtz his job. He's dead now, isn't he?

G: Yes. He died in 1951, I think.

M: He's a fine man.

G: What was he like?

M: Wirtz? He was a first class, honest lawyer with a lot of guts and who never failed to speak up to Ickes. I think Ickes liked that. Maybe that's why he offered to make me his under secretary, I don't know. But I turned him down.

G: You did?

M: Sure.

G: When was this?

M: Oh, God, this was early in the war. No newspaperman that's got any sense wants to work for the government.

G: This must have been after Wirtz left for that campaign.

M: Yes, I think it was.

G: Was Senator Wirtz a mentor to LBJ?

M: Yes, I think he helped him. He gave him introductions, I think, to business people in Texas. I don't know that that's where he made his liaison with George Brown, but it may have been, or with Sid Richardson--

G: They were clients of Wirtz.

M: --but it may have been. Sid was a good friend of mine, a good friend of his, and so was George Brown. It was to Sid, as you know, that he sent John Connally when Connally got through here or quit here. Actually, Connally's wealth is attributable to that relationship that occurred after Lyndon had got him his job down there.

G: I have heard that George Brown was Lyndon Johnson's best friend.

M: I think he was as good a friend as Johnson had. God knows Johnson got enough business for him. REA projects were profitable, and George Brown got a hell of a lot of them. What was the name of his brother?

G: Herman.

M: Herman. It was at George Brown's house down in Virginia that Lyndon had his heart attack. This was a good man, but George Brown was in business and that was his business.

And then there was another chap at the time. . . . What the hell was his name? An oil man. I think he was a regent. I have forgotten, but he was part of that same group. Anderson. Was he the treasury secretary?

G: Yes.

M: He and Johnson and Sam were very close when Bob Anderson was secretary of the treasury. Did he head WPA or some other federal agency down in Texas before he came here, Bob Anderson, that is to say?

G: I don't know whether he did or not.

M: I think he did. I have forgotten which one.

G: What about his relations with Sid Richardson?

M: They were quite close. I remember once he wanted me to ask Sid as my guest at the Gridiron Club, which I did. He had a hell of a time and did the damnedest thing I ever saw and embarrassed the pants off me. Some weeks after the dinner had been ended and he had gone home, I got a call from his nephew, the man who really took that thing over. What was his name? Anyhow, young Carter and this man called me from the Mayflower--we were at an office on 13th Street--and said Sid had sent me a gift and they wanted to bring it over to me. I said, "If Sid's good enough to send me a gift, I ought to go after it." What they brought me was a hand-tooled belt with a gold buckle about three inches big with a gridiron set in little diamonds, and it was decorated with rubies. I never in my life had a pair of pants that I thought was worth holding up with that belt. I finally had it made into a pin for Mrs. McNeil. But that's the way Sid operated.

I went to Fort Worth once--I used to go down each year to travel around among our papers--and he was my host in Fort Worth. This was before he had come here. There was no better. I liked

Sid very much.

G: Sid Richardson did not oppose the "Big Inch," did he?

M: No, not as far as I know.

G: What was Lyndon Johnson as a congressman like? Was he a good congressman?

M: He was a good congressman. He worked for his district, and he took care of his mail. He answered all those ticky-assed little inquiries that a congressman gets. He accumulated a pretty good staff and worked the hell out of them, as he did all his staffs. But he worked himself, and so did Lady Bird. He was doing his best to do the people's business, and I think did it damn well. Now if you ask for specifics, it's so damn long ago I couldn't tell you. I do remember one project he had in mind; he credited me with it, and I think I was the author. Texas had a tremendous water shortage, strange as it may seem, along that east coast. Houston and those cities, with all the water that the petro-chemical industries were using, just didn't have enough water. He had to have an issue. He was minus one at that point. I urged him to get in on this, which he did, and got Army engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation to do a couple or three extensive and quite expensive surveys. They finally came up with a project for a canal several miles back from the coast that would have serviced Houston and various cities that needed water. I actually don't know what the hell ever happened to that project. It's either still in the works, or they've built it or something. I don't know.

G: Were you with him much socially when he was a congressman? Were you over at his house?

M: Yes. Yes, there and he here, and then out in Maryland when we lived there. ASNE, American Society of Newspaper Editors, used to meet here annually. They met here this year. Since, they've changed [to] the business of meeting in various cities. All my editors would come, and they would come here or they'd come to my house in Maryland. Lyndon would usually show up, take over the conversation, and fill them full of stories, some of which were the usual. . . . When Lyndon wanted to be he could be full of bullshit, and he was occasionally, at least on these occasions.

He came here several times for dinner as president and sat over there in this bar and monopolized, as he always did, the conversation to the point where even Bird had to tell him at one point, "Let somebody else talk." It didn't do any good, but she told him.

G: What would he talk about?

M: Anything, everything.

G: Was it primarily politics?

M: Oh sure, that's what he lived on. That was in his blood. He had a lot of friends in the press. Bill White was practically his press agent when Bill was a correspondent for the New York Times. Bill himself [was] a Democrat. As for myself, I have always been a mugwump. He filled that paper with the Democratic story from start to finish, all of which or most of which he got from Lyndon or from

Earle Clements and other Democrats.

I was thinking since Mary called the other day that in all the years I knew Lyndon and covered him in the House, in the Senate, and as a president, I never got a scoop off him. Never once.

G: Did you ever ask him for one?

M: Well, maybe I'm just one wrong on that. The water story I told you about, I broke that first, which was a big story in Texas. But on the national scale, never a real exclusive. If he had any, he gave them to Bill White or he gave them to columnists. Although we had a hell of a lot of circulation at the time--I've forgotten how many papers we had, twenty-one or twenty-two--he was impressed, as all these people are, by the pundits, the Alsops, the New York Times. Evans and Novak may have been operating then, but I don't remember it. Who was the old man that lately died?

G: Arthur Krock?

M: Well yes, Arthur, but I was thinking of the man we made a myth of.

G: Lippmann?

M: Lippmann, yes, who was a socialist in his younger days, never was really a very good newspaperman, but acquired himself one hell of a reputation.

G: How was he able to do that?

M: He had the right contacts and he worked it, and he had a hell of a circulation. He sold that thing all over the damn country. He was a "yes, but" man.

G: Did Lyndon Johnson in these early days attempt to get a very positive press?

M: Oh, he worked at it day and night.

G: How did he do it?

M: By having people in and by arranging for them to see people. Once, I've forgotten what the hell it was now, but Ev Dirkson had a story and I wanted it. I talked to Lyndon. I called Lyndon out in the Senate. He came, and he said he knew something about it, but he knew the man who really knew and said, "I'll send him out to you." He had that possessive air as he always did. So who came waddling out but Ev Dirkson, and he had the story. I have forgotten what the story was at this point, but Johnson told him, and I got it.

G: Do you remember what year that was?

M: Oh, it was when he was leader. He made a great leader. He got things done in the Senate. He had with him the best nose-counter that ever lived up there, Bobby Baker. He depended greatly on Bobby and Bobby on him. Lyndon knew where all the bodies were buried. He knew the backgrounds of every man who came to the Senate. He knew their weaknesses, their desires, and he played on them and got his votes when he needed them. It always puzzled me why, when there was such a close liaison between him and Bobby Baker, he made himself so scarce when that scandal broke. I don't know what he was afraid of. I have never talked to Bobby about it. He [Johnson] was as kind and as helpful as he could be, for example, to Walter Jenkins when Jenkins got his ass in a crack, but not to Bobby.

G: What did he do for Walter Jenkins?

M: You remember the story.

G: Sure, but . . . .

M: Well, he was good to him. He didn't fire him, and I suppose he arranged for him to get whatever job he's got in Texas. You of course have him in this [oral history] thing, I trust.

G: Yes. As long as we're on the subject of Bobby Baker, how was he able to count so accurately on those votes?

M: Bobby was a first-class politician himself. He once thought very seriously, so I'm told, of running for the Senate from South Carolina, wasn't it?

G: Yes.

M: He had been around a long time, everybody knew him, everybody liked him, and the press liked him. If you wanted to know what was going on in the Senate and what was likely to happen in the Senate, you could call and ask Lyndon and you probably would not get an answer. If you knew Bobby well enough, you would get an answer.

G: Was he indiscreet at all?

M: I didn't think so. I didn't think so.

G: I would seem to me that operating in this position, without any inherent power because of his position, would naturally make him very vulnerable to one group or another.

M: He may have been vulnerable, but that vulnerability never got him, never hurt him, while he was in the Senate. This income tax thing I suppose is just human greed. He had a lot of rich men who were on his list of close friends. That terrible person from Oklahoma

who was chairman of the Space Committee--not McGee . . . .

G: Kerr.

M: Bob Kerr, yes.

G: You didn't like Senator Kerr?

M: Oh God, no. He was the most arrogant man I nearly ever saw.

G: Really?

M: Oh, yes. He never deigned to call anybody but, I think, Lyndon by his first name. I think he may not have profited directly, and I don't know that he ever did anything wrong, but as a senator he didn't lose any money and neither did his oil company, which went not only for oil but for uranium. I think finally he helped finance Clint Anderson in a banking operation out in New Mexico.

B: Before we continue on the Senate, I want to ask you about the 1948 campaign.

M: Refresh my memory. Was that the one with Coke [Stevenson]?

G: Particularly Coke Stevenson's trip to Washington, and Taft-Hartley.

M: My recollections there, there are only two that amount to a damn. Lyndon came back here, and Stevenson had issued some kind of a statement. I have forgotten now what it was. Lyndon wanted to answer it, and he wanted me to write it. Well, I did. Somewhere in my papers upstairs I've got it, with his interlineations. Whatever Stevenson had alleged or asserted, this was a denial and a defense. The only other thing I remember of any importance at that point was the hearing before Hugo Black. [Abe] Fortas was his lawyer. I had known Black in the Senate very well, and there

was a great senator, not only a great justice. This was in chambers, but I think I was helpful in talking him into letting the press sit in on this argument.

G: Talking to Justice Black, you mean?

M: Yes. This was the argument that Fortas and whoever was Stevenson's attorney made to the Court. Fortas, of course, was a long, long time friend of his. He had been in Interior, I think, even when Wirtz was there, or maybe before. Yes, before, because I think he was in Agriculture before he went over to Interior. And then he had known Lyndon for years. He was indeed his lawyer, and out of that grew the appointment to the Court.

G: You were there when they argued in chambers?

M: Yes. They let Texas reporters in.

G: Yes. Who else was there in terms of attorneys?

M: I have forgotten who Stevenson's lawyer was.

G: Just those two lawyers?

M: And the press and Black. Oh, Fortas and the other man may have had some help with them, but I have forgotten who they were.

G: Did you think at the time that Fortas was going to win that argument?

M: Yes.

G: Why?

M: I think he had the case. Of course, I was never any admirer of Mr. Coke Stevenson.

G: Did Justice Black ever talk about that later?

M: I never asked him about it. The only thing I ever tried to do with

Black was get him off the Court and get him back into the Senate, where we needed him. He carried on the old--you don't remember it--air mail investigation, when they took the air mail away from the Air Corps, as they called it then, and gave it to private industry. There were more shenanigans than you could shake a stick at. Black was the chairman of the subcommittee that investigated that. Moreover, I knew him well from another angle, because during those years we were carrying on what they called the Muscle Shoals fight. He, Lister Hill, and George Norris were the guts of the group in the Senate that finally got the TVA bill passed.

Going back a minute to the fact that I never got a scoop off of Lyndon. Somewhere around here I've still got some pictures of him and Bird around the door out there, but [there was] one I took down and now I think I had better put it back. It was autographed, "From Lyndon to Marshall McNeil, my friend except where a story is concerned." I thought that was about the finest compliment a newspaperman could be paid.

G: That's fascinating. Did he get mad at the people that didn't write friendly [stories]?

M: Oh yes. Yes, sir. He called me up many a time to eat my ass out, not only in the Senate, but in the presidency.

G: Why?

M: I don't know. He would get mad, and he'd call. He had to get something off his chest, so he got it off his chest. It didn't really mean anything; I mean, it didn't affect our friendship.

G: Was he ever able to influence you to write a [story favorable to him]?

M: No. No, I think Lyndon told the truth when he autographed this photograph. We were the first papers--and our papers had never done this before--[that] endorsed him for the nomination. We never had endorsed anybody for a nomination before, the presidential nomination. This was chiefly the work of the man who was then our editor-in-chief, Walker Stone, who came from Oklahoma. He's dead now. He had covered the Hill, but I had brought about his introduction to Lyndon, and he and Lyndon got along very well. He was high as a kite on Lyndon. We endorsed him, and it looked, by God, like he was going to make it, but he didn't. And then he lied to me and everybody else that I know about when he swore and bedamned he wouldn't take the vice presidency.

When he did that, I got really browned off at Lyndon Baines Johnson, and I stayed that way during his vice presidency. I saw almost nothing of him. But finally when he became president and came back here, it struck me that I had better do for our country--what I thought was for our country--as much as I could. So one night after talking this over with my wife, I called him at the White House. He was surprised as hell, one of the few times I ever saw Lyndon surprised. I congratulated him and told him I was proud of him, and I was then prepared to do anything I could to make his presidency good. He thanked me. He often called me after that on various things, always about stories in the paper

or getting things in the paper. He very seldom listened to your arguments, but he expected you to listen to his, which you did.

G: Did he ever call asking you to follow up a certain story or to write up [a certain story]?

M: I can recall only once. It was during the Vietnamese War, and the newspapers were telling about what our men were doing and how they were killing them and blasting them and napalming them. But there was a hell of a story about what the North Vietnamese were doing to the South Vietnamese as they went through these villages. He thought that story ought to be told. He called me to the White House and I went, and after skinny-dipping we went back to his office. He called somebody; I have forgotten whom. Within the next couple of days I got a file--my God, it was about four inches thick--of statements and accounts of the atrocities of the North Vietnamese, all marked "secret," all of which I still have. I wrote several stories about it.

G: Did he ever ask you on another occasion to balance an unfavorable story, say a political type of story?

M: If he thought some piece didn't tell the whole story, he wouldn't hesitate to ask you to write a piece or to get a piece written. If you ask for specifics, I can't remember them, but that's a fact.

G: How about if you had written a piece that was unsatisfactory?

M: He didn't very often speak to me about those. Some of our editorials he didn't like, some he did. But for pieces that I wrote while a correspondent for Texas, covering him as a Texan, I can't ever

remembering him getting sore about any of them. Although I think I was known as one of the burdens he had to bear; I had no hesitancy about questioning him about anything. I never did anybody, for that matter. Some of these things he didn't like very well, but I usually got an answer. It may have been ambiguous as hell, but I usually got one sort of an answer or another. Because Lyndon would tell you only what he wanted to tell you and nothing more.

G: Did he ever chew you out about a story you had written?

M: Not that I had written, no. Just to show you how he did not listen to others' arguments: the war was going poorly, and we should have done at that point what Truman did. That was to raise enough taxes and put on enough controls, as Truman did during the Korean War, to let people know we were fighting a war, which they didn't know at the time. I went to the White House after talking it over with Stone. Stone had been there, and he hadn't done any good. I went there and talked to him about it, didn't do a damn bit of good.

As for that war, they have confused the hell out of me since it ended. Then of course Nixon confused me from the very minute he came to the House. I detested him for what he did to Helen Gahagan Douglas, if for nothing else. But Lyndon was right about that war, and we fought it for what I thought were good purposes. Of course he feared, with the backing of the Joint Chiefs, that if we went any further and made it more than a limited war we'd have Russia and China on our necks. This is what kept him from

winning the war. I never did quite believe that he thought that getting out would result in peace. I think he got out because of his heart and because Bird had had enough of it. She called it "The Compound."

Incidentally, a friend of his and mine, perhaps my dearest friend, has lately written a book called, Political Animals. His name is Walter Trohan. He was the chief correspondent here for the Chicago Tribune for a great many years, and there's some damned interesting stuff about Lyndon in that book, published about a month ago by Doubleday. And certainly so far as the Johnson story is concerned, I think that's worth your reading.

G: Good, I'm glad to know about it.

You mentioned Nixon and Helen Gahagan Douglas. I have heard that that was one of the reasons that President Johnson disliked Richard Nixon, because of his campaign against Helen Gahagan Douglas.

M: I hope that was the reason, but he sure as hell didn't like him. But after a man becomes president and he still lives [after his presidency], that's the smallest and most exclusive club in the world, and all members of it are close. Whether ideologically or not, certainly they were close.

G: Do you think Richard Nixon before that was his primary political enemy?

M: No. No, I thought that when he started to run for the nomination he not only had Kennedy, but Stu [Symington] was running at that point, wasn't he, and Bob Kerr was a candidate, it seems to me.

As I said, we lived under a congressional government at that point, and I think we're getting back to it a little. I hope so. He thought that a man who could run the Senate as he ran the Senate could win his nomination with the support of senators, which he couldn't. The old man bought it for Jack, and Lyndon knew he bought it for him.

I had a farm out in Maryland, and I remember once John Connally called me. I didn't have a telephone at that point, and somehow he got hold of my builder, who had done my house over. This chap drove about twenty miles to tell me that I had a call from Washington. He gave me a number, and it was John. John wanted to talk about Arizona, and I said, "Sure, I'll come in." So I met John here. He sat where you sit, and he tried to sell me the story about how the Kennedys had bought Arizona. It was a damn good story and I'm sure it was true, but he refused to be quoted, refused to have any connection made with him and the Johnson campaign. I refused to go out on that limb with no backing, so I didn't write this story.

G: You mean, [the Kennedys] bought the Arizona delegates, is that right?

M: Yes. Yes, and bought the election there, too, as a matter of fact.

G: Just by pouring a lot of money into the campaign?

M: Yes. I think John had the facts, but he wouldn't stand for quotes.

G: There was one thing I wanted to ask you about the 1948 campaign again. I hate to jump back, but I understand that you were the one

that got Coke Stevenson caught on that Taft-Hartley statement. He was in the shower or something and you went into his room and asked him about it, and he said he didn't have his notes with him, or something like that.

M: Well now, I have forgotten that story completely.

G: That doesn't ring a bell?

M: Doesn't ring a bell, no.

G: I think you are credited with exposing his ambivalence on that.

M: I'm sure I did. I remember the Taft-Hartley story, but I can't remember talking to Coke Stevenson, whom I have heretofore said I didn't like. I can't imagine being in his hotel room talking to him while he was in the shower, because I never got that close to him.

G: I was going to ask you. You had talked about Robert Kerr, and I have really gotten the impression that he was somewhat respected in the Senate because of his power, perhaps his money, and he was a friend of Lyndon Johnson's. How would you contrast him to Richard Russell?

M: Lyndon had two real good, deep friends in the Senate: one was Dick Russell, and the other was Walter George. Upon them he depended almost exclusively, that is when he really got down to the guts of things. Bob Kerr was a fixer, as Lyndon was, and when he needed somebody to be fixed, Bob Kerr would do it. But his friends, the two men whom he respected, whom he followed, were Dick Russell and Walter George. You may remember that there

was the case of Case--it was in North Dakota or South Dakota, I have forgotten which--who got accused of some sort of campaign contribution violation. Lyndon set up a special committee with George as the chairman of it.

Incidentally, when George found that he couldn't be re-elected and young Herman Talmadge was going to be, he had been selected as our Democratic speaker at the Gridiron dinner of that year. Then he kissed out. Roscoe Drummond was the president, and he couldn't think of anybody, didn't have anybody who could make a speech that was worth a damn. So he called me of a Sunday and pleaded with me to do what I could to get Lyndon to make the speech that George was to have made. I called Lyndon, and I went out to see him and was able to talk him into it. He didn't want to, but he did. He got "Tommy the Cork" [Corcoran], Bill White, myself, and somebody else to write his speech for him. It was a damn good speech, too; it did him well. In those days the Gridiron Club was important. We actually did make or break politicians. We broke Taft, for example.

G: How so?

M: Because Taft just made such a damn poor speech. Gridiron speeches were important in those days. I was thinking here the other day, here's a chart of my dinner when I was president in 1954, and I find Lyndon down here the last man at the head table. I think this was Eisenhower's first term; he had been in office one year, I think. Lyndon, I think, was leader then, but we put him way

down there. After being president he came to Gridiron dinners occasionally, mostly at my urging.

He embarrassed hell out of me one evening. He was supposed to be the speaker, and he had said he would be. We depended upon him. I was seated at the table, and Jack Valenti came over to me and said, "The President wants to see you at the White House now." So I had to leave the dinner, had to go over and listen to him read his speech, which he did upstairs in the little sitting room to Bird and me. It was a damn good speech, but he changed it as he got to his feet [to speak], because it wasn't in his original text, and started it off by saying something that sounded funny at the time about how Marshall McNeil had talked him into this and he just had to do it. Finally he had this speech typed on that green White House stationery at the time, gave me a copy of the speech as delivered and autographed it. I was very proud of it.

G: Did you ever help him with other speeches?

M: No, not with Senate speeches, but with Gridiron speeches.

G: Let's talk about his advisers, the people around him. How important was George Reedy to him?

M: Not very. He didn't pay much heed to Reedy, I'm sorry to say. George was a nice boy. His father was a hell of a good newspaperman. George wasn't the best press agent in the world. He tried his best.

He came down with this idea that Johnson was isolating himself from what the people were thinking. Didn't he write a book about that?

G: Yes, Twilight of the Presidency.

M: Yes, which I thought was a lot of horse shit. There was another young man up there who worked for Lyndon and did write a book named . . . .

G: Harry McPherson?

M: McPherson. As far as the staff of the Senate was concerned, there I think was a very close adviser, and McPherson was a damn smart boy. I think he and Bobby [Baker], as for the Senate staff, were a damn sight closer to Lyndon and more important to Lyndon than anybody else. When Les Biffle was there, he of course was very close to him. His advisers outside of the Senate were [Tommy] Corcoran, Jim Rowe, George Brown, Sid Richardson, Phil Graham, who was then the editor of the Washington Post and subsequently committed suicide.

He made a point of seeing all newspapermen, and everyone left thinking that he was Lyndon's best friend, and at that point I'm sure he was. He worked at keeping the press on his side. In fact, sometimes he worked too damned hard at it. It always irritated the shit out of me that these effete easterners claimed that his presidency was marred by the fact that he talked like a Texan. Do you remember those stories? That irritated the bejeezus out of me, but then I suppose that's my background.

But he was a showoff; there wasn't any doubt about it. That

marvelous picture of him showing his incision, that's pure Johnson. He could have done that as a congressman or as a senator or as anything. That was Johnson. He had no intention of hurting his dog. That's the way he played with his dogs; he pulled them up by their ears. He had some cute gimmicks. I remember Pete Brandt, now dead, who was then the chief correspondent for the Post-Dispatch. He and I went there for lunch one day. We talked about everything and his dog, and finally, as we left, we were marching down the hall on that second floor and had gone past the elevator because Lyndon had seen a light on. At that point, Pete and I broke the story of the President who ran around the White House turning off lights. Lyndon was proud of that.

He was proud of gadgets. He had a wristwatch that had an alarm on it. After he had recovered from that horrible heart attack, one of the first things he did was have the Texas reporters out. He gave each of us a tiny radio, about as big as a pack of cigarettes. They are common now, [but] in those days they were expensive as hell. God knows what they cost Bird, but he had one for each of us. He was a gadgeteer; he just loved gadgets. Like the windows that he had Hoover put in the White House so that he could lie in his bed and push a button and the windows would go up. He had a telephone in his car. I once had to meet him at the airport. His car came up, and he was going home and had the man take me home. He was proud as Puck of his mobile telephone. He said, "Did you ever use one?" I said, "Hell no, I never used one."

He said, "Why don't you call Blanche." So I got on the phone and called my wife, and it tickled him that I liked his gadget.

G: He never liked to be away from the telephone, did he?

M: No. No, no. He did a thing that no other president, as far as I ever read or knew about, did. That was, he would answer the telephone when you called him at the White House. I don't mean he would answer it immediately, but when you called the operator and told her your name and said you wanted to talk to the President and if it was inconvenient to tell him a time you could call back or she could call back, by God, you always heard from him. He just lived by the telephone.

G: Do you think this helped keep him in touch with people?

M: Oh, of course, of course. He knew what was going on. This crap about him being isolated from the people is true in the latter days when the demonstrations were so big he did not get out and make the speeches that he would have liked to have made, but there was never any doubt in my mind that Lyndon knew what the hell this country was thinking and doing.

G: We were talking about press people earlier, and you were talking about George Reedy. I was going to ask you about Charlie Boatner.

M: Charlie who?

G: Charles Boatner.

M: No, I'm sorry, that doesn't ring a bell.

G: He worked for him as a press man.

M: It doesn't ring a bell. The chap that went with American Airlines . . . .

G: Warren Woodward?

M: Warren Woodward. I remember him.

G: How about Horace Busby?

M: Yes, just a name. I knew Busby. But we never got much out of George. George did his best, but he was not a good press agent. He was a good reporter, but he was not a good press agent.

G: What role did Walter Jenkins play?

M: Walter, I think, was the man closest to him on the staff. I think he handled all his personal problems, his radio, his television, and his problems in Texas. And Walter was a hell of a nice guy. The story of this YMCA thing was as great a shocker as I ever met up with in this town. I thought I knew Walter. I thought I knew something about people, but damned if I ever had the faintest glimmer of a suspicion that Walter was a queer.

G: Would Walter Jenkins give you stories on LBJ?

M: Oh, occasionally, and so did Arthur Perry. Perry went to him after having been with Connally for a number of years. He depended upon Arthur to handle most of the correspondence affecting Texans and their little troubles down there because Arthur had been around so damn long. He knew how to take care of a veteran's complaint, how to get somebody on the WPA, or whatever. He was a very first-class gentleman, by the way. And then Lyndon was good enough to take him into the White House. Which reminds me, if you don't have the lady--my God, she must be ninety now--who was in the White House with FDR . . .

G: Grace Tully?

M: Grace Tully. Have you got her?

G: I think so.

M: Good. Good.

G: It seems that President Johnson's relations with the press became more and more strained after 1964.

M: Yes, because Johnson was never forthright with the press. As I said, I never got a scoop out of him.

G: Do you mean he was secretive?

M: Oh, hell, yes. He loved secrets; he just doted on them. If there were any to be broken, he was the man to break them, not anybody else.

G: I understand also that one source of irritation with the press was the fact that he never gave them enough notice on where he was going or anything, and they would have to--

M: Yes, he would make up his mind to go. He probably knew months ahead that he was going to go somewhere, but he would tell them at the last minute. And he would hold a press conference like that with nobody around except the people that happened to be at the White House. Then he did this damn fool thing of walking around the rose garden and talking as he went.

We've been chewing the fat for an hour, which is long enough, I think. But let me try to sum up what I think about Lyndon Johnson, if this is of any concern to you. He was a great [majority] leader. I think he was the greatest senate leader that we have ever had. I read about them, and I knew them back to Joe Robinson on the Democratic

side and Jim Watson on the Republican side--as I said, I almost go back to Fillmore--McNary and the rest of the Republicans, White of Maine. He [Johnson] was the greatest Senate leader we ever had. He knew more about the government of the United States than any senator that I ever knew. He started his presidency with this terrific tragedy, but I think he handled himself in the best possible way, with one exception. He should have fired all those Kennedy people out of the White House. He didn't do it. I don't know why. Why he kept men like Sorenson, Bobby at Justice and the rest of them, I don't know, but he did. But that was his basic error as president. If he had put his men in to start with, he could have stayed there, I think, as long as Roosevelt, the war notwithstanding. He got saddled with the war and became, so far as the war was concerned, another Monroe. Was it Monroe who was President in the War of 1812?

G: I believe so.

M: That was our first unpopular war. The Mexican War wasn't very popular either. But he had the same experiences Monroe had in trying to make a war popular, except that Johnson never tried to make a war out of this so far as the people were concerned. If he had gone to them and demanded taxes and sacrifices of butter . . . . But he wanted both butter and guns, and damn near got it. I thought that the principle of the war was right. I thought the limited war concept within the framework of the history at that point made sense. I don't think we could have undertaken the prospect of a war with Russia or China.

In my view--and I have written this and I believe it--the thing that historians are going to find out is that Lyndon Johnson was one damn good president, a great president. You don't have to go to the war; you don't have to go to what he did for education; you have to go to the thing it seems to me that was the guts of our problem at that point, and that was civil rights. Now here was a Texan, and he did everything that a man can do. In one of the most dramatic speeches I ever heard in my life, the one at night to the House--I don't know whether it was on the Voting Rights Act or the second civil rights act--he took over their phrase, "We shall overcome." This was a thing that I am sure Texas never understood. I know damn well the South never did. But it's his civil rights record that's going to make him in history a great president.

G: Is there anything else you would like to add?

M: No, I can't think of anything.

G: Thank you very much, Mr. McNeil.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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