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INTERVIEW VII

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INTERVIEWEE: LAWRENCE F. O'BRIEN

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. O'Brien's office, New York City

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G: [Let's begin with] the assassination. Did the fact that the assassination occurred in Lyndon Johnson's home state cause a certain amount of bitterness toward Lyndon Johnson among the Kennedy people?

O: I don't think so. I don't think that was an element in the attitudes that developed in the aftermath. There were those, as we have discussed, who had very negative views of Lyndon Johnson. And they probably, in some instances, had those views before the assassination, but didn't have a handle to articulate them to their friends and associates or press.

I think what clearly came out of the assassination, regarding its location, was the very strong anti-Dallas, anti-Texas feeling on the part of a lot of people. Certainly that encompassed a great number of Kennedy people. The viewpoint I would hear repeatedly [was], "I would never visit Dallas again. I'd never want to be in the city. I dislike those people." It was, again, the irrational aspect of it, because if you look at the assassin and where he came from, what did that have to do with the city of Dallas? But they weren't accepting that. For years I'd have people repeatedly tell me about their dislike for the city of Dallas and dislike for Texas. They were very negative comments. Then they seemed to fade as the years went on; I haven't heard that sentiment in a number of years. But that was a lasting attitude toward Dallas, the city and the people of Dallas, as felt by people far removed from Dallas. But it was not, as I recall it, personalized in the context of any strong anti-Johnson feeling. However, there were some people who weren't closely associated with Kennedy or the administration who did connect Lyndon Johnson and Dallas in expressing their views. But once you got beyond that group, the anti views really were aimed at Texas and Dallas rather than at Lyndon Johnson individually. But it did create a great deal of feeling.

I had occasion to go to Dallas, not for quite a while after, and I also remember when I went down there for the ground-breaking ceremony for the new arena. The mayor and some of his associates were taking me to TV stations, and there was going to be a cocktail party hosted by the Dallas Cowboy people to get acquainted. During the course of the day, the mayor and his associates felt that I would want to travel the route a little bit and take a look at the building again, which I didn't want to do. It wasn't because I had

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any anti feeling, but I didn't want any reminders. They meant well, so I didn't say anything and we did a quick motor trip around that area.

I suppose a tragedy of that nature is bound to arouse great emotions, and if it does arouse great emotions, adverse comments, attitudes, and irrational points of view will arise. I've never been in a similar situation, obviously, but I would guess, as we discussed yesterday, experts evaluating and analyzing such occurrences could almost predict those reactions. And it was pretty widespread.

G: Did you ever talk to LBJ about his view of the assassination or how he explained what happened? Did he ever, for example, feel that it had been a conspiracy or anything of that nature?

O: No, I don't recall any conversations with him on the assassination. There were probably references to it, but it just never came into our discussions.

My sole after-the-fact involvement was, as I recall it, being interviewed by the Warren Commission. And, frankly, my feeling was that the sooner I removed myself from all of that and adjusted my own thought process, the better. It had made a tremendous impact on me, which I'm sure it did on everyone else who was intimately involved. In fact, the impact was so great that I have difficulty with it to this day. I think that affected me when I was doing my book, so I didn't dwell on it at any great length. I didn't find I was capable of it, frankly, and I find that I can become emotionally involved and upset by it if I get into too much of a discussion of it, what, twenty-two, twenty-three years later. I guess these feelings remain, and I assume the combination of Dallas and being with Bobby [Kennedy] when he was killed leaves its mark and leaves some emotional scars.

My general attitude was that I didn't introduce it into conversation, obviously, and I refrained from getting into conversations with people who did bring up the subject. It was a matter of avoidance of the whole matter, but there were two occasions when I had to face it. One was the interview for the Warren Commission, which basically went to how many shots did I hear and that sort of thing. And the other occasion occurred a long time afterward when Abe Fortas and Clark Clifford came to see me in my office at the White House one day. From time to time you would hear reference to what happened to the missal, which I always referred to as a bible because I never did open the cover of it, the missal that I handed to Judge [Sarah] Hughes for the swearing-in. I had no idea what happened to it. It had disappeared on the plane, I was told. Obviously, once the swearing-in was over, I made no effort to take the missal back or even note where it went. It was a long time, maybe a couple of years, I guess, and Clifford and Fortas came in to see me and they had the missal.

G: Is that right?

O: Simply, I looked at it. I had a better recollection then than I have today of what the cover looked like and the composition of it. They said, "Is this the missal"--or whatever way

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they referred to it--"that you gave to the Judge which was used in the swearing-in ceremony?" I looked at it--I didn't open it; I just looked at the cover because that's all I would be able to identify--and I said, "Yes, it is." Where they got it and where it went from that moment, I don't know.

G: Was this while you were postmaster general or beforehand?

O: I would think it was before that only because my recollection is I was questioned about the missal in my White House office. My guess, therefore, would be I was still [on the White House staff] because once I was postmaster general I was not in the White House office very often.

G: I wonder why they were pursuing this. Perhaps to find out how it had surfaced?

O: It had been located and how it came into their possession, I don't know. Who may have felt he had a memento of a truly historic event that could be kept quietly and secretly for years and surface at some appropriate time, I don't know. But I will say that I always regretted that I didn't question them--this was a short discussion and ended quickly. It was some time after that that I thought to myself, I wonder where it had been, how it came into their possession and, more interestingly, where is it now. I assume that you people probably have it.

G: Yes.

O: You do?

G: Yes.

You alluded in your book to the fact that you were not privy to any discussions regarding the possibility of denying the presidency to Lyndon Johnson after the assassination. Were you aware that discussions had taken place that at least is it conceivable, is it possible that Johnson could be prevented from assuming the office?

O: I was not only not privy to any discussion that might have taken place, I can't imagine the grounds or the common sense of any discussion of that nature. It never would have entered my mind, never has, and I'm a little amazed even now if there was some indication discussions of that nature took place. I probably would not be privy to it because I would quickly remove myself from anything as ridiculous as that. I can't comprehend people considering bypassing the Constitution.

G: But do you think that such discussions did take place?

O: I've never heard of them.

G: Really?

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O: Never.

G: Let me ask you how Congress responded to LBJ's assumption of the office, the transition. From your vantage point on the Hill, how did it--?

O: I think the congressional reaction across the board was comparable to the reaction personally that I had and the reaction of most people, certainly, who I had any association with; that was the need to ensure there was in place an orderly transition. [There was] a totally supportive attitude, coupled with a very strong feeling on the Hill that there should be every action taken, every position taken which would underscore the strength of the Constitution in the process, and it was very supportive of Lyndon Johnson. I think that branch of government reacted in a very positive, supportive manner, and I never heard on Capitol Hill the kind of comments that I heard among some of the Kennedy people I have referred to. They would be from people who had, in many instances, close friendships with Jack Kennedy.

A good example would be Eddie Boland, who introduced me to Jack Kennedy in the first instance. I'm glad I thought of him. He is a fellow who had known Kennedy from the time he was elected to the House of Representatives. Eddie wasn't in the House at that time, he was registrar of deeds in Springfield, but Eddie has been a family friend and a close personal friend over all those years. To this day I've never heard Eddie Boland make a negative comment about Lyndon Johnson or express distress about the state of Texas or Dallas. And I think that's why you have to draw the line when you say how wide was the circle, how far do the ripples extend. I think that perhaps my dwelling on it may even in a sense exaggerate it. But I want to make it clear, if anybody ever wants to have my views someday in the record, that the comments were confined to a relatively small circle of people who had been politically involved with Jack Kennedy and had been closely involved with him in his administration. It didn't even extend to people who knew him well, thought highly of him, and certainly Eddie Boland's in that category. He thought the world of Jack Kennedy, and I've talked to Eddie Boland on scores of occasions. Obviously, we've had a lot of contact over the years, and as I'm reflecting now, I have no recollection of Eddie Boland ever making a negative comment about Johnson, a negative comment about Texas. And I'm sure that he, among his colleagues, had adopted the same attitude, that we can be proud of our country and we've got to make sure the world understands that we're supportive of our new president.

G: Did LBJ do anything unique to solidify the congressional support or anything of this nature? I know he addressed Congress but--

O: Yes. Other than that, I don't think of anything that you would term unique. I think, as I described it, there was a continuity which had to be maintained, and that went to the legislative process. It went to the relations between the White House and the Congress, and Lyndon Johnson plunged into the continuity of that relationship without any hesitation or without any delay, and it just moved right along. You know, we were really from day

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one, following the funeral, totally engaged in that area of activity, which would be the area I was involved with. And I would have to assume--I have no reason to suggest otherwise--that comparably in all other areas of presidential authority and responsibility, foreign policy and whatever else, everything moved on without interruption.

G: Do you recall anything on Johnson's discussions with the foreign leaders that came for the Kennedy funeral?

O: No, there was such an influx of foreign leaders, and protocol was maintained throughout. I don't recall specifically who they were, but there were half a dozen key foreign leaders who had relatively brief meetings with the President, all as part of this ceremonial situation. Certainly I don't recall anything of great moment emanating from all of that over the period of two or three days.

I think it's just amazing, that whole period, when you think of it. I remember in the last phase of the funeral program, when the body was removed from the Rotunda of the Capitol, that we--the White House staff--joined the procession at the White House, for we had watched it from the Capitol down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House on television. That was the moment when John-John saluted the television set and later on did the same thing at the church. It was during that period that one of the ushers, at Dave Powers' request, brought a bottle of champagne, and Dave and Ken and I opened the bottle and we saluted and drank a toast as we watched the set. But once you joined this procession, it was a mass movement; it was not a very orderly procession. There was dead silence, just the beat of drums. To go up to that cathedral to the beat of drums, to see people like de Gaulle and Haile Selassie and Prince Philip walking along the street and into the church, to look around and see these world leaders in every direction you looked, right through the ceremony at Arlington, was overwhelming. Certainly, nothing of any moment was occurring which would impact on world relations or anything else. I'll never forget they were in the same pew--Selassie and de Gaulle--and the contrast in size and the unbelievably brilliant uniform Selassie was wearing was striking.

G: There was a presidential succession agreement with John McCormack in case of presidential disability. Do you recall that being arranged?

O: Yes, I recall it being arranged. I don't recall the details of it, but my recollection is that this was pretty informal historically. While you could sit and look at the established succession procedure, you could go down the line through ten different people. As a matter of fact, I was in that line.

G: Were you really?

O: Because I was in the cabinet position which was the third or fourth cabinet position established. It didn't make any difference what the line did, as you had John McCormack, but it was determined that we should formalize this procedure so there'd be no questions about it in the event a situation occurred. Nobody ever imagines anything happening that

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would bring you to the speaker and then to the secretary of state, et cetera. So they formalized it to be sure the record showed exactly what was to transpire. For example, I for one had no understanding, I'm sure it never entered my mind, that the provision for succession specifies that it is automatic. And if you go back to *Air Force One*, I don't believe there was anyone on *Air Force One* who had that understanding. But there has to be some ceremony, there has to be some action taken. The contention afterwards, of course, was there was no need for any action. Yet I don't think historically there has ever been an occasion where there hasn't been a swearing-in ceremony. Whether it was Coolidge or Truman, there was always a ceremony and an oath taken. But the fact is that the experts on the Constitution insist there's no requirement.

G: In this case, you had the question of the President's health and an arrangement whereby if he were disabled, either because of a heart attack or something, then McCormack would step in and take over the duties temporarily, I guess relating to an agreement that Nixon and Eisenhower had worked out. Carl Hayden was president pro tem of the Senate, so two people in the line of succession were quite elderly at the time.

O: Yes.

G: Was this a concern to you or to the President?

O: It was a general concern, a recognition, let's put it that way, of the facts of life, and a feeling that we'd better have this in order. Part of it clearly was the age of both Hayden and McCormack. I think it alerted everyone, and such a situation alerts people to the fact that a procedure should be established and not be subject to question or scrutiny.

G: Did the assassination cause Lyndon Johnson and/or the Secret Service to be more protective in terms of presidential travel?

O: Oh, my gosh!

G: Did you notice a difference?

O: Yes, there was a tremendous, immediate reaction. We've had the ebb and flow of that, haven't we, right through our history? I remember it vividly because I saw it. I don't know the date, but it was shortly after Lyndon Johnson was president that Herbert Lehman died. The President was going to the funeral and I went with him, and the funeral was here in New York and the service was in Temple Emmanuel, on Fifth Avenue. We came into New York and the motorcade to the service went through completely empty streets. Pedestrians were not allowed outside. Everywhere you looked, you saw the military or police with guns showing, machine guns, out of windows and on edges of roofs. It was eerie. You went right up to Temple Emmanuel to that ceremony and not a soul was allowed on the streets. It wasn't long afterwards that things changed and went back to more awareness, better protection, greater alertness, if you will. Nevertheless, it is beyond human capacity to exert that kind of constant total protection to a president.

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We found since then with Jerry Ford and later on with Ronald Reagan that things aren't that different and that, well, you've reached the time in our democracy where you might have something similar to what I just described going up through the canyons of New York.

It's interesting that press access to the president is accepted here to a far greater extent, I think, than perhaps anywhere in the world. The press that travel, of course, are allowed to get near him all the time. At the time of the President Reagan assassination attempt, I believe the fellow who attempted the assassination was really in a coterie of people which was construed to be press. And it'll always be that way. There's a great exposure. And President Kennedy hit it right that morning in the words he uttered to me: "How easy"--and it is easy. And it's easy to this day and always will be.

G: Was there a difference between President Kennedy and President Johnson in terms of caution regarding presidential travel? Was LBJ more cautious, do you think?

O: Yes, at the outset. He surely approved of what was transpiring in the way of protection, so he shared the general concern, obviously, that we all had. But there's nothing you can [do]. For example, I never looked at the statistics of the presidential mail coming in constantly in the form of threats, but there's a good deal of it. It's handled by the appropriate people as best they can, to follow up the checkouts. There has been, since my days in and out of the White House, a very easy access, almost informal. It's now very formal. On rare occasions I've been in there in recent years, I've noted that there's a considerable change in that regard. But yet it's not that difficult. Of course, the barriers that have been put up and all of the problems around the world today have added a dimension to White House protection and protection of the Capitol. But in the final analysis it's just a little more of the same, but it is a far cry from total protection, which is impossible.

G: Let's talk about Lyndon Johnson and Robert Kennedy in 1964. You were perhaps in the middle, over the years, in that relationship. Did either man make an attempt during that year to improve the relationship?

O: Yes, Lyndon Johnson did.

G: Did he?

O: In the sense that on a number of occasions--the President would discuss this nonrelationship with me. I wasn't awfully keen to be the fellow Johnson discussed it with, and, also Bobby Kennedy discussed it with. (Laughter) But it just played out that way. Interestingly, the President took the route of establishing a considerable amount of contact with Teddy Kennedy. He had him down to the White House on a few occasions where he had an opportunity just to chat with him. They were getting along famously, at least on the surface. And they were, because I never had had discussions with Teddy about Johnson and he never talked to me in any anti-Johnson manner. I think Teddy felt he was

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going along about his business and he wasn't about to be part of all of this. (Laughter) On I don't know how many occasions but more than one, the President would talk to me about this and in the context of not understanding why this situation existed between him and Bobby, and why Bobby had this attitude, as he saw it, toward him when he and Teddy had this pleasant relationship. It just didn't make any sense. And how could I explain all that?

G: How did you explain it?

O: (Laughter) I didn't. I said, "I don't know. They're brothers, but he's a senator and Bobby's in your administration. I don't think either one feels he has to hold the hand of the other. Each one is capable of doing his own thing." But it was a clear indication that the President felt this was a way of establishing some kind of reasonable climate. It was also an indication this was of considerable concern to President Johnson, that it bothered him greatly that this personal separation or attitude existed. But that is the most significant and probably the best evidence that the President was making a real effort to see if he couldn't bridge this. And he felt that having this pleasant relationship with Teddy would lead to Bobby not having that glare on his face all the time.

But they distrusted each other, and there was an arm's length, uneasy situation between the two of them. And of course the time came when Bobby was absolutely exercised about Vietnam and considered, as you know, doing something about it in terms of seeking the presidency.

G: But in 1964, aside from the friction with regard to the assassination and this inevitable problem here, what were the other elements that caused friction in their relationship?

O: I really don't know. I can't cite a litany of occurrences that caused this. It would not have existed to the extent it did at the time we're talking about if there hadn't been a long-time attitude on the part of Bobby regarding Johnson and similarly, to some extent, Johnson regarding Bobby. I think, very frankly, there were contributing factors, I suppose, in the minds of both men. But also, you had such diverse personalities. Bobby wasn't Jack.

And I've had difficulty over the years recalling the view that was expressed in a couple of books or by journalists that Bobby was calling the shots, and Jack Kennedy would get up in the morning and feel he had to lean on Bobby to get through the day. That was absolutely untrue. Nothing like that existed. What you had was a close relationship between two brothers with the clear understanding on the part of Bobby that his brother was boss, his brother was president, and Bobby's total commitment to his brother was to be as helpful as he could in every way he could, while his brother felt totally comfortable in discussing anything and everything of a sensitive nature with Bobby and felt very comfortable having Bobby around at major crisis times. But to suggest that Jack leaned on Bobby to steer him is a misrepresentation.

So let me get back to Lyndon Johnson. What were Jack Kennedy's innermost

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thoughts about Lyndon Johnson? I don't know. But I know that in terms of the conduct of the office, the relationship between the President and the Vice President, maybe it's similar to a relationship I would have with Jack Kennedy. I always applied the word professional. I firmly believe Jack Kennedy respected me, appreciated what capacity I might have had, or I wouldn't have been in the role I was in in the campaigns or in the White House. And I had great respect and regard for him. I looked to him for leadership and had total confidence in his ability to govern. With regard to the President and the Vice President, I never saw an indication that Jack Kennedy had harbored some personal animosity toward Lyndon Johnson or that he had concern about Johnson's conduct in the carrying on of his duties as vice president or the assignments the President gave him. In the context of the unique aspect of the president-vice president role in our democracy, it is an extremely difficult relationship, extremely difficult, and I think both men have to be very sensitive to that and perform accordingly, and that was [done] throughout.

Bobby Kennedy must have had some fairly strong views personally regarding Lyndon Johnson or this situation that we're discussing in 1964 wouldn't have existed, because I don't recall a single incident that sparked a flame. It was there. What day did it start? How did it start? I don't know. But you also have to build into this that Lyndon Johnson was a very suspicious person at times. He had his insecurities. I don't know whether that's the proper definition. However, what Lyndon Johnson and his associates went through in the [1964 Democratic] National Convention reflected absolute paranoia on their part regarding Bobby Kennedy and people like me. And yet I'm on a day-to-day basis performing my functions with the President, and after the convention the President seeks me out to go out and tour the country.

But nevertheless we were absolutely isolated at that convention; by we, I mean the two closest people to Bobby politically, and personally in the case of Ken O'Donnell. Ken and I were over in some motel somewhere as far removed [as possible] from what was transpiring in the convention in terms of planning or carrying it out. Sure, we had the credentials and we were on the floor. But the total concern on the part of the President was what might occur at that convention to disrupt his candidacy. The emergence of Bobby in the film, and the great debate Steve Smith got involved in about when the film would be shown, I'll tell you candidly, Ken and I sat in that motel and we would just burst out with laughter. We thought it was the funniest thing that we had ever experienced, and it was ridiculous, it was absolutely ridiculous! And really what it went to, if you were to take it seriously, was questioning of our loyalty to the President we were serving. And that would bother you. But it was ludicrous, and yet it went on. Now that I think [back], you have to say, Lyndon Johnson clearly saw in Bobby a very serious challenge to him.

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G: Do you think that Johnson was aware of Bobby Kennedy's hostility toward him?

O: I don't know at what stage he was aware of it. I think, frankly, he made a significant contribution to the hostility.

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G: Do you?

O: Oh, I think so. I think as time went on and there were all these indications of how the Johnson people were suspicious of Bobby, suspicious of us and concerned about us, I never treated [it] as anything more than ridiculous, frankly. I'm glad I did treat it that way because if I had taken it seriously, which Bobby obviously did, I would probably have wound up in a situation where I would have had some confrontation. It wasn't that I refused to take it seriously, it was so ridiculous that I just didn't give it any credence. And yet it was there to a considerable degree. Now, what have you got? You've got this movement further and further apart as a result of all of this.

G: In 1964 did Johnson use you as an intermediary with Kennedy to try to improve the relationship? Did he ask you--?

O: Not specifically, but it was obvious that was what he would like to have me be. It might have been, I don't recall that it got that far, "Can't you talk to Bobby? What's bothering him? Tell him that I hold him in high regard. I've got great respect for him." But it wasn't, "Could you get hold of Bobby and get him in here and the three of us will sit down and spend an evening together? Let's let our hair down. This shouldn't be occurring and [let's] get it straightened away." I think it was the combination of how he thought he could work with Teddy in this area and that I ought to be, with my friend Bobby, trying to cool things or straighten things out.

G: How did their relationship affect the cabinet meetings when Robert Kennedy would be there?

O: Well, on the surface things just went along in the normal course.

You have to recall, too, through these months of 1964, clearly Lyndon Johnson felt Bobby at a minimum was going to take some actions or exert whatever pressures he could to be the candidate for vice president. Regardless of how he might want to have some kind of a cooling-off relationship, the last thing Johnson wanted was to have Bobby Kennedy as vice president. That wasn't going to happen. During those conversations I had with Bobby, at no time did Bobby envision he was going to be designated by Johnson as the candidate for vice president. But that got you to the convention, the film and everything else: "Well, he knows I don't want him. He has to know that. But, by gosh, those people somehow, somewhere, are going to pull a stunt." And the paranoia set in.

Then the time had ultimately come in the context of 1964 and the politics of it. Of course, there were probably a dozen potential candidates for vice president that were surfaced by Lyndon Johnson one way or another. And I was constantly having conversations with the President on the results of all the polls that were being conducted. He'd pull them out of his inside pocket and we'd go over them one more time. Of course, the polls were simply showing what obviously they would, that of all these various candidates none of them

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strengthened Johnson's position, and Hubert Humphrey was a wash, he didn't hurt or help. That probably would be the reaction you'd get on polls of that nature anyway. But to the point of encouraging people who would surface in the press as on the list, there was no discouragement. And this went on and on, up to and including a part of the convention.

But I think that, very frankly, the meeting that took place--and I believe that's the meeting where Bobby had told me that he was coming over for the meeting, had--

G: He came to your office first, didn't he?

O: Yes. And then said, "I'm going to meet with the President. Could we have lunch afterward?" And we did. And I think that really capped it, because in the President's effort to advise Bobby he wasn't going to be on the ticket, Johnson unfortunately did two things. One, he said, "I'm not going to have any member of the cabinet on the ticket," which was not a very saleable presentation. If that was supposed to alleviate the situation, it probably was counterproductive at that moment. And secondly, he aroused Bobby's total suspicion that the conversation had been taped.

G: Why was his suspicion aroused?

O: Just the way the conversation was conducted, the way Johnson conducted his end of the discussion. Heck, I don't know what transpired in the meeting. We were going to have lunch, and it just happened that that was the key meeting with the President. We went over to have lunch and Bobby then started to talk about the meeting, and I must say he was very low key; in fact, with a good sense of humor, because there was no surprise in this except the way it was done. And Bobby said to Ken and me--the two of us were with him--"I'm just persuaded [it was taped]." And he said, "I would absolutely resent it if the conversation was taped." And then it was suggested by Ken, "Maybe it wasn't taped but there was a voice box of some sort and Walter Jenkins was in another room taking notes." In any event it was clear [from] the aftermath, because Johnson called Jenkins in to review what he said was a memo he had dictated to Jenkins as to what transpired at the meeting. You know, people were just not buying that.

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So be it. But what was concerning the President? I don't know. So I cast myself in his role at that point. What was concerning him was he had to make it clear to Bobby that he wasn't under consideration and he took that means to do it. And, secondly, he was fearful of what Bobby's reaction would be and what he might undertake as a result of that meeting.

Bobby's reaction, I must say you'd have to know Bobby and the great difference between Bobby and Jack in personality. There was a tremendous difference. Bobby could sit and look a little perplexed or knit his brow and think long thoughts and say, "Gee, I"--he told me and he thought that there was even a bit of humor. And he thought it was a little ridiculous to put it in the package of "no cabinet member." But he was concerned about the tone as well as the substance of the discussion, because he said he felt it was staged. Consequently he was very suspicious. He felt it had been taped, and we got into whether it was taped or Walter Jenkins listened to it. But nobody after the fact was buying that he called Walter in and said, "Now I want to dictate a memo to you." But so be it and that was no big deal either.

But it bothered Bobby because he said he just didn't appreciate that happening. He said, "If the President had said to me, 'I'd like to have this conversation on the record. Do you mind? We'll put it on the record so there will be no misunderstandings later,'" he would have immediately acquiesced. But that bothered him--not that he wasn't going to get on the ticket, but the thrust and approach to the discussion and his suspicions regarding it.

G: I see. Well, you indicated in your book that there were two different versions of what was said at that meeting.

O: Yes.

G: That Kennedy had one version and when you later talked with Johnson, or they had--what happened, did Jenkins come out and bring his memo?

O: I don't recall whether he said, "I dictated a memo to Walter just to be sure that we'd have the record of the discussion, and this is the way it went." I don't recall, in fact I probably didn't listen that much. Bobby's version really went to not so much what was said as how it was said and his suspicions of [being taped].

G: So the big difference was in the recording angle rather than who actually said what?

O: Yes, that's my view of it, because again you can't avoid the human element. That is the aspect that historians obviously have to have problems with. You just have to a) be close to it, as I was in this instance, and b) have a very good understanding of the two personalities involved. Then what is supposed to be a big deal can be a lot less than that, although the aftermath can be troublesome. But it's just two people [too] suspicious of each other to have a conversation. You start with that and then you go on from there.

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(Laughter)

- G: Johnson's version seems to have stressed Bob Kennedy's disappointment, how disappointed he was, reportedly, that--
- O: Well, if Lyndon Johnson had called him in that day and the conversation went, "Bobby, you may be surprised, because we've somehow seemed to have had some problems or misunderstandings, but I want you on the ticket," Bobby Kennedy would have shaken his hand, I am sure, and said, "Let's go." But I've got to emphasize I don't believe at any time Bobby Kennedy seriously considered that was going to happen. Unless he was putting on a performance, he did not evidence any degree of disappointment. The emphasis was on the tone and the substance of the discussion, not on the message.
- G: Did Johnson later ask you about the lunch and what transpired?
- O: I don't know whether he did or didn't.
- G: Why did Kennedy want to be vice president?
- O: I don't know how much he wanted to be, because that wasn't a matter he and I ever [discussed], and if he'd wanted it badly, he would have discussed it with me.
- G: But he must have wanted it or he wouldn't have pursued that with Johnson.
- O: Well, he wasn't pursuing anything. He wasn't making any effort.
- G: He wasn't--?
- O: No, he was keeping his own counsel, but as far as the President saw, Bobby was out there and Johnson had to at some point say, "You won't be on the ticket." Bobby Kennedy had not made any public proclamation that he would refuse to be on the ticket.
- G: Well, Johnson seemed to be under the impression that Kennedy was lobbying to get on the ticket, that he was talking to people, talking to press, and trying to get them to lobby with Johnson for him.
- O: Well, if he was, it was unknown to me, and I find that hard to believe. If that were the case, why didn't I know it? Why didn't he talk to me? After all, we had been on a close and intimate political level since 1952 and anything of this nature would almost automatically fall into an area that I might have some input on or some thoughts. And Ken O'Donnell, who was very close to Bobby--they had been classmates and extremely close friends--never suggested to me, and in turn Ken and I were very close and we were really the political operatives. That never came into play.

The only thought that enters my mind is it is conceivable if Bobby was doing what

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people suggest he might have been doing, he would not bring me in because I was in the service of Lyndon Johnson. He would know me and know that I would not participate in any activity that would undercut the President. Incidentally, that would be Bobby's nature. Bobby was a very straight arrow and you never had any problem determining what Bobby's view or position was. He'd make that clear. By the same token, you have the utmost confidence in Bobby's understanding of loyalty. For example, when I stayed with the President, Bobby made the point of coming to see me to discuss it before it was finalized.

G: Why didn't Johnson want him on the ticket?

O: I don't think that there ever could be the kind of relationship that's called for between a president and a vice president, where Bobby and Lyndon could on a daily basis be involved to the degree and with the sensitivity that goes with carrying out the role of vice president. I had never had any problem in my mind about the vice presidency, because the vice presidency clearly belongs to the president, the president must make the ultimate decision, and the president has to live with it and him. And I'm sure I never gave a fleeting thought to mixing oil and water in the presidency and vice presidency. So if Lyndon Johnson ever selected Bobby Kennedy as his running mate, it would be based solely on the cold practicality that he needed him in order to be elected, which was a significant part of the decision-making process when Johnson was named vice president. Short of that, if everything is equal and you don't need him, obviously you try to seek out somebody who can take your direction, who you don't have to be concerned about. And Hubert Humphrey fitted that--

(Interruption)

G: Did you or Ken O'Donnell have any--or for that matter Bob Kennedy--any other evidence that Johnson had a recording device and was taping that?

O: Oh, no, and I must say that even in the context of that luncheon it didn't get to the point of saying, "My gosh, wouldn't it be great to know? Is there some way we could find"--none of that. I shared Bobby's concern. I was hopeful Bobby's suspicion was not accurate, because I thought that would have been a mistake if it had been done by the President. I have strong views on all of that, and that applied to the Kennedy Administration as well as the Nixon Administration. You know, it's the last thing I'd ever contemplate doing, taping them. I don't care about what the law says or doesn't say. I consider it immoral. And I think I'd resent it no end, and in fact probably to a greater extent than Bobby appeared to with his suspicions at lunch. Maybe in further contemplation or back home with Ethel, he got into an uproar about it, I don't know, but let's face it, he did not have any proof. It was purely a suspicion. I must say afterward when I had the conversation with the President, I considered Bobby's suspicions might be correct.

G: What else did Johnson say in that meeting that you had with him about the conversation?

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- O: I don't recall the purpose of the meeting was this subject, because I had so many meetings and I was with him so much. This came up in conversation and the reference was made to the memo he had dictated to Walter, in order to have me know exactly what happened. It was just, "I want you to know that we had this meeting and this is what transpired."
- G: Bob Kennedy was quoted as saying in reaction to the exclusion of all members of the cabinet from consideration as vice president that "I took a lot of good men with me."
(Laughter)
- O: Yes, the quote is accurate. Bobby wasn't a fellow that exuded a lot of humor all the time, you know, but at lunch he really saw the humor of this. He was chuckling; he thought it was really kind of an off-the-wall approach.
- G: [Sargent] Shriver was one of those that he took with him. Do you think Shriver would have been seriously considered?
- O: No. You mean, in 1964? From the conversations I had with him, no.
- G: Any other cabinet officers? [Orville] Freeman?
- O: No. I think he was very comfortable with his presentation to Bobby. That was an attempt to give it a little bit of a cover.

I'm trying to think of some of the others that were in the Senate who were on that supposed list.

- G: Well, Eugene McCarthy and Tom Dodd, for two.
- O: Yes, Tom Dodd took it very seriously, and Tom thought he was making a trip to the White House at the [President's] request [and] the President was going to name him. McCarthy took the occasion to chat with me at a function at the White House. I couldn't quite understand why Gene and I were becoming buddies all of a sudden. I didn't have any animosity toward McCarthy. He aggravated me no end before everything was over with Hubert Humphrey. But McCarthy's attitude toward Kennedy, his reminding me what a great friend he was of Jack's, finally hit me. He felt it was conceivable Lyndon Johnson might discuss Gene McCarthy with Larry O'Brien, and he'd want Larry O'Brien to have a favorable view of Gene McCarthy.

I had little or no question about who was going to be on that ticket for a long period of time. It was appropriate and obvious to me. When the President asked me what my view was, I told him without equivocation, Hubert Humphrey. Hubert Humphrey should be his running mate.

- G: Did he feel that Humphrey had any liabilities?

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- O: No, he relied a lot on these polls. They were dog-eared by the time he got through with them. He carried them in his inside pocket. His pocket started to bulge. Regarding Hubert Humphrey, there were two aspects: one, while there wasn't any indication he would add to his strength there was, as he saw it, reasonable indication he would not detract from it; and two, he and Humphrey had a long association and could get along well together.
- G: The one liability that at least is attributed to Humphrey from LBJ was that Humphrey had a difficult time keeping his own counsel.
- O: Well, I don't know if he would have considered that a serious liability. All of us who knew Humphrey knew that he had difficulty in terminating a speech, which he recognized. We used to kid him unmercifully about it. He had a tendency to be a devoid-of-guile sort of fellow. I guess you could put it in that context. Humphrey's personality, his great forthrightness and honesty impressed me. However, I later felt there were inadequacies in his staff, and he found it impossible to dismiss anyone.
- Just to divert for a moment. I never would have become involved with Humphrey in his campaign as I did after Bobby's death if that hadn't been the case, which he recognized himself, because it was sort of late in the game to introduce new key people into a campaign. And yet through my chairmanship I brought people into the campaign that were really Kennedy people, Joe Napolitan and Ira Kapenstein and people like that. It was unfortunate because that never happened to Kennedy. His team was in place from day one and remained intact throughout, and you didn't go out seeking outside assistance to bolster a campaign effort.
- G: Back to the LBJ-RFK relationship, LBJ did ask Robert Kennedy in 1964 to involve himself in the Indonesian-Malaysian conflict and he did negotiate a cease-fire there. Do you have any insight on that assignment?
- O: No. It was construed by Bobby and those that were close to him and to the President as a meaningful gesture, on the part of the President, to indicate to Bobby that he'd like to have a more comfortable relationship, and Bobby reacted very favorably to it in the sense that he was excited about the opportunity and the challenge. So it was good in that regard. Bobby was really appreciative.
- G: Did Bobby ever ask you to advance either a proposal or something on behalf of him to the President?
- O: No.
- G: Okay, as long as you've talked about the convention, let me ask you to elaborate on the film and the statement you made earlier about how paranoid the Johnson people were.
- O: Well, that was the evidence of paranoia. That's really why I cite it. First of all, you have a

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convention located in what were basically inadequate facilities. I don't recall the background of the choice of Atlantic City, but at that time Atlantic City hotel accommodations were inadequate. So the functioning of the convention presented some difficulties.

It was going to be a routine convention without any basic problems. The President was high in the polls. It was well understood that he would be elected. There had been an evaluation of his potential opponents and the conflicts in the Republican Party. The selection of a vice presidential candidate would be widely accepted; no difficulties there. Thus you could put on a show for public consumption and go on about your business.

The only area that emerged as an area of difficulty was the role of Bobby or the film in the convention. As I said, there was a degree of isolation involving me in terms of the convention. By that time Marvin Watson and Walter Jenkins had come aboard, and others were running the convention--rightly so--which was fine with me. So I had a non-role, but I did feel that the schedule of the film and the great concern about it on the part of the Johnson people was uncalled for, because I knew there wasn't going to be any movement of any kind in that convention involving Bobby Kennedy. It didn't exist. If there was a feeling on the part of the Kennedy people or Steve Smith or Bobby to see the film at a certain point in the convention schedule, why not? Why make an issue of it? Therefore, to start trying to slot it in some place that really didn't fit--I don't even remember the details--just gave clear signal that "We're suspicious of you people; we know that if you get an inch, you're going to try to pull something. And we're going to be absolutely sure you don't get that inch."

Well, you might as well have taken out an ad in the paper on the attitude of the Johnson people toward the Kennedy people, and it was so unnecessary. It didn't have any impact on the election either; it didn't make one iota of difference. There again, my reaction to all of that, as I told you, Ken and I would sit and just chuckle, because it was so ludicrous. In any event, all it did was cause further animosity, and to the world at large, it was absolutely meaningless.

G: Did you have any role at all in the preparation of the film or arranging it?

O: No, I can't recall who did the film. Probably [Charles] Guggenheim. And, therefore, I probably did see some of the rough cuts. I don't remember.

G: Anything on the Mississippi controversy, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and their efforts to be seated at the convention?

O: No.

G: You were not in a position to--?

O: No. There again, I mean, who cared? If you go back over Democratic conventions in my

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memory, this convention was about as placid as a Democratic convention could be, as routine as a convention could be, and certainly unique in terms of the Democratic Party. If you look at the record of the convention and all that transpired, you'd say, "That was a yawn."

G: Okay, let's go through some other issues that came up in 1964. One you talked briefly about yesterday, the Pierre Salinger [Senate] race and the controversy regarding his seating. The peculiar thing about this is that Tom Kuchel supported the seating of Salinger while [Everett] Dirksen challenged the legality of the appointment. Do you want to--?

O: It isn't that peculiar, on reflection. Tom Kuchel was a unique Republican senator. With his voting record, his attitude toward our programs, Tom was considered by us to be a friendly member of the United States Senate. By the same token, Tom Kuchel was considered by his constituency in California to be quite liberal. Many Democrats were very comfortable with him in California, just as we were comfortable with him in Washington. And Tom Kuchel could show statesmanship and bipartisanship, if you will, without being uncomfortable.

G: Was it difficult for him to remain in a leadership position, though, with his party when he was taking--?

O: I think what carried Tom with his party was the very nature of Kuchel the man. He was a fellow who was held in very high regard by just about everyone up there, and that would be an important factor in retaining a leadership position. Listen, it provided a little balance on the Republican side. Dirksen really was the Republican powerhouse. And it gave the Republicans, in perception, a little broader base than they really had.

G: Another example of Kuchel's broad-mindedness was the fact that he didn't support his party's nominee that year, Barry Goldwater.

O: Yes, that's right.

G: There's even some evidence that the Republicans tried to remove him from the whip post because of this alleged disloyalty and that perhaps Johnson used his ties to prevent that from happening. Do you have any recollection of that?

O: I recall the concern on the part of some of the Republicans, but your concern can be greatly lessened with a devastating defeat. If you're subject to that kind of a defeat, it doesn't provide much of a position for you to be punishing people. But I do vaguely recall some comments along that line. After all, there are some very conservative Republicans up there, but Kuchel, after all, was a senator from a very large state with a very strong base of support, a very broad constituency. In addition to that, Tom and I became very close friends. Probably we saw things the same way on most occasions. (Laughter) But personally, Tom bought my house when I sold it.

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G: Did he?

O: Yes. So you're talking to a fellow that couldn't see anything really wrong with Tom Kuchel's positions even though some Republicans could.

G: But my question here is did the administration attempt to help Kuchel in retaining his leadership posts?

O: I don't recall, and I can't believe the administration would be in a position to. That, to me, could have been counterproductive to Kuchel. I don't think the Democratic administration could affect the leadership decisions of the Republicans of the Senate. In fact, if there was too much interest shown in preserving Kuchel's role, that might encourage some to make a greater effort to remove him.

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O: Re Pierre Salinger, there was some ground for challenge, which Everett Dirksen seized upon; obviously his legitimacy as a resident of California. I recall that it is so unusual, it certainly doesn't occur very often to have an opportunity to be designated as a senator. I truly felt that old lucky Pierre had just lucked out unbelievably, and it kind of resolved a White House situation, too.

G: Oh, did it?

O: Well, that wasn't the motivating factor. It just cleared away any possible problems in the press office and everybody was happy and comfortable. Beyond all that, Pierre's ultimate challenger was considered by us to be such a weak candidate, you couldn't do better in a state the size of California, and we were all flabbergasted when it didn't work out for him. Perhaps the Republicans in the Senate made some contribution because, obviously, one of the weaknesses that stayed with Pierre was a feeling this was a gift that was unfairly presented to some fellow in Washington who may have at one time lived in California and that just wasn't right.

There isn't a great deal to talk about other than the tobacco lobby, and the congressmen and senators from the tobacco states were, in combination, extremely strong, vociferous and hard-hitting when anything occurred that might impact adversely on the use of tobacco. To that extent, there were some contacts from North Carolina and elsewhere and expressions of concern. Those expressions could be pretty strong, but I don't recall that it adversely affected pending or future legislation.

I had it brought more forcibly to mind, without any thought to the sensitivity of some people in this area, when I was postmaster general. These were always awesome numbers in the Post Office Department, whether you're talking about the number of post offices, the number of employees, the number of anything. We had some twenty-three,

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twenty-six thousand postal trucks around the country. There might have been more. You had panels on the side of the truck, and on a public service basis you would periodically change the panels and have a nice message for the public.

We tied into this whole issue and I came up with a great idea as postmaster general: why didn't we have this anti-smoking [campaign]? Being an avid smoker all my life and remaining one throughout this period, nevertheless, I thought that was a good public service announcement to make use of the panels, and I proceeded to issue the directive. Well, the group came in on me--

G: Did it really?

O: --from the tobacco states, which I hadn't even thought of, and from the Hill. As a fellow who can be accommodating when it becomes necessary, I agreed to a compromise on the use of the message on the trucks so it wouldn't be used in the tobacco states. I think it probably only involved North Carolina and Virginia. But whatever it was, that was the way we worked it out. At least my conscience wasn't totally troubled, because if that eliminated a few hundred trucks, we still had thousands around the country with the message.

The only point of that story is--and that still remains the case, of course--the awareness and alertness of the industry, its lobbying group and its representatives in the Congress. If anything occurred of that nature over the years, you'd get this very strong, very tough reaction to it. But despite all that, the non-smokers seem to be making progress as time goes on. I now look around every restaurant I sit in to see whether or not smoking is allowed or whether the party at the next table look like people who might attack me if I light a cigarette. I have become very sensitive. I noted last night the same thing. I looked across the table and I saw a girl smoking there. Otherwise, I probably would have hesitated for a while just to see what the lay of the land was. They'll get to it totally one of these days.

G: Were there problems for the administration, though, in advancing these warnings?

O: No, we were in accord with it and it was right and proper, so they moved along, as they saw it--the Surgeon General and the rest of them--and there was no attempt on our part whatsoever to deter this activity.

G: I believe at one point Jim Goddard came out with the statement that it was safer to smoke marijuana than to smoke cigarettes. Do you recall that?

O: No, but I wish I had known about it at the time. Maybe I would have changed my habit.

(Laughter)

G: One of the programs enacted that year was the federal food stamp program, designed to

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increase the buying power of low income people, and there were a number of issues connected with it. This is on page 6 in the [legislative] outline. One was having the program administered through the Department of Agriculture rather than HEW. Do you recall this decision?

O: Only that there was controversy about it. It was more a jurisdictional problem and [there were] strong views in both departments, reflected therefore by the appropriate committees on the Hill. After all, you're going into a new program. You're trying to contain this tremendous problem, food distribution, across the country. It was very innovative, I thought. Obviously, you'd want it properly administered, but there weren't overriding views and if compromising would be helpful under the legislative process, that was a comfortable position to be in.

G: Here you had a case where the northern Democrats on the Rules Committee were evidently holding up a tobacco research bill until the food stamp [bill] received favorable action.

O: That's accurate.

G: Can you recall the details of that?

O: Yes, because I thought it was pretty clever. I'm sure while we weren't directly party to it we were in accord with the procedure, because that was a handle available to try to force some people in line who obviously would not be supportive of this legislation if it were naked out there.

G: Okay, I gather under this arrangement these two measures were--

O: My recollection is each assured the other that enactment would take place.

G: Yes. But then evidently the tobacco bill never cleared the Rules Committee so--

O: Yes, that's right.

G: But the food stamp bill was tied to the cotton-wheat bill, and those two were brought to the floor the same day. Now, was this the same--?

O: The same, yes. And that wouldn't be unusual. What are the possibilities, what are the areas that you could consider that might enhance the process? You look at people who have a keen interest in cotton, you look at people who have a keen interest in tobacco--but particularly in this instance, cotton--and you find people you are pretty sure would not have any interest or less than keen interest in a food stamp program. You weigh all this and determine if there isn't some strategy that can be developed so that you can gain an inch or two in that direction, rather than just let them have free rein on their cotton. I mean, that would be part of the whole process.

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G: Who would put this sort of deal together?

O: Well, we'd have a role in it and this would be a matter that you would discuss with the leadership, not in the formal context of a leadership breakfast necessarily, but in the strategy sessions. You'd discuss it with the appropriate committee members and you'd just feel your way through it. We would be directly involved; by we, [I mean] the White House staff. We would by that time have no compunction about getting involved with things of that nature. In 1961 we would probably have shied away from it and been fearful that somebody might attack us.

G: Yes.

Recreation legislation: you had two major parks and recreation measures that passed and the establishment of some new park systems, the Ozark National Scenic Riverways in Missouri, Fire Island Seashore in New York and Canyonlands in Utah. Anything on the political process regarding the designations here?

O: No, what would normally happen in something like that is you'd try to put together a package that might garner assistance from various quarters geographically. And basically, without checking it out as we're talking, my guess in this instance would be that this brought some strength to the proposal if you look at the differing geographical areas that were involved.

G: How about the Roosevelt park on Campobello? Was this a problem in terms of the--?

O: Well, it had been considered on previous occasions. It was highly visible, for obvious reasons, and I don't recall that it was a problem. I think it was considered in the nature of naming a building or an airport after a former president.

G: But it was on Canadian soil, wasn't it?

O: Yes, I know, but--

G: Was this a factor that came into--?

O: No, I don't recall it was.

G: A very significant piece of legislation, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the allocating of funds for the purchase of this land.

O: Of course, what you get into was the cost factor, and one phase of this was the matter of fees, and then you have pretty strong views on both sides of an issue. But they go back again to a person's basic view on economics and on government spending and responsibility to contain spending. You know, it's the whole thing; it sort of merges into

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"All right, you're going to do all this and what is it going to cost and this sounds good and I'm not opposed to parks, but who's going to support them? Why should the taxpayers who don't go to parks support the parks?" That was a portion of this whole discussion and debate on this issue. I can't get into a lot of specifics on it, but right from the outset there was an understanding on our part that this could be very controversial, as it turned out to be. It was not an easy task.

It had a high priority, primarily because of Mrs. Johnson's interest. Certainly that was a significant aspect of it. There was a judgment early on that you've got to establish a concept, put in a program, give it legitimacy, have it in place. And it's really like you were planting a tree; it's going to grow. That was a discussion that actually took place, and it included some conversations with the leadership. At that time there was not much enthusiasm about this. There was on the part of Mrs. Johnson and others in the administration, but you didn't have this widespread "Oh, here's a crusade. We all want to join it." There was a road to travel and a little educating of people so that they would focus on this. So how do you go about doing all that and have a reasonable opportunity to accomplish it? Let's not try to go for a whole loaf on this. Let's get it in place and it'll be there to build on. Once it's in place, somebody isn't going to come along and successfully make an effort to repeal it. So that really was the thrust of our approach to this whole thing.

G: There was a provision that a motorboat fuel tax would provide revenue and this fund had previously gone to the Highway Trust Fund. Was this a controversy?

O: Yes.

G: How did you work around this?

O: I don't remember just how that played out, but I think some of the items became controversial. This often happened where there would be at least the occasional surprise factor. As you evaluated these things from a White House or a joint committee-White House point of view, you at times wouldn't envision the degree of controversy that would occur, because from your perspective you just wouldn't feel that it should be that controversial. But there again, you have the bureaucracy. If you're going to lose some source of revenue and it's going to be diverted somewhere else, before you know it, there's a big conflagration. I guess we probably should have been more cautious. But, in any event, it was hard to discern the degree of controversy in some of this.

G: Did Mrs. Johnson sit in on meetings here, or what was--?

O: Yes. There were a couple of meetings she sat [in] on, but my strong recollection is how intensely she stayed abreast of the progress to the point where she would contact me regularly to get an update on what was transpiring, even to going over to the living quarters, which I did on two or three occasions, to discuss the matter in detail with her. I was extremely impressed, not only [with] her interest and dedication in this area, but with

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her--which I don't think I was totally aware of up until this time--broad knowledge of the whole process and her understanding of the intricacies, the problems, the ebb and flow of this whole thing. I also recall she had occasion to discuss this legislation with appropriate people on the Hill, by phone or if they were down at some function--

G: Anyone in particular?

O: No, I don't recall, but overall I have a vivid recollection of not only her interest, but her actual involvement, and more than that, how impressed I was with her knowledge and understanding of the process.

G: Okay. Another measure that year was the National Wilderness Preservation System, coming out of the Wilderness Act. Here you also had some controversy. It was a conservationist bill, but you had to make some concessions to the commercial interests, mining. Do you recall that?

O: Just in the context of compromise. The thrust of the bill was, you know, a conservationist thrust. It's strongly in that direction, with an understanding up front there would have to be compromise down the road, that we were not going to get a wilderness bill without compromise with mining or lumber. And that's what occurred.

The conservationists--it's funny I remember that because we had preliminary discussions, obviously, with some of those entities and [I remember] their enthusiasm. Everything was halcyon, and this was in the good of the country, which we agreed with, and there was no reason in the world why people should oppose this because this was in the context of apple pie and motherhood. The reality was pretty clear at the outset that we were going to run into some significant roadblocks and there was going to have to be compromise and, of course, the conservationists weren't going to be happy with that. But there was nothing abnormal in that kind of a situation. You just do the best job you can. It was a very normal legislative effort in that context, forgetting the issues involved or the substance.

G: There was a special effort to exclude the San Geronio, I guess, Wild Area in California from this measure and [inaudible].

O: Yes, I don't remember the pressure points there, probably better organized.

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview VII

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Signed by Lawrence F. O'Brien on April 5, 1990.

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