

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 1

INTERVIEW X

DATE: June 25, 1986

INTERVIEWEE: LAWRENCE F. O'BRIEN

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. O'Brien's residence, Cotuit, Massachusetts

Tape 1 of 2, Side 1

G: I just indicated that the record shows there were twenty-three of those regional meetings that you held around the country in 1964. I think there were only half that many, perhaps, in 1960 when you traveled. You talked some about that assignment last time, but one thing I wanted you to elaborate on today. Was there a feeling on LBJ's part that things were not happening, that the campaign was lackluster and something needed to be done?

O: I believe so. It was a two-pronged situation. Sitting at the White House, he didn't discern that it was a very active campaign. And secondly, he felt that there was complacency generally, that it was a walk-through and everybody assumed it. Human nature being what it is and LBJ being how he was, he wanted to build a victory to the fullest extent possible. He became concerned and he had mentioned it to me on a number of occasions. We had gone through campaign planning internally, which took the form of a memo that I gave him earlier on the campaign organization. But the implementation of that didn't seem to be taking place. At least he felt that way and I guess I concurred because he was busily engaged in all of his problems and I was engaged in my own problems legislatively. Who was paying attention and who was really honchoing all of this?

And it finally led to an insistence on his part that I get out in the field and determine to what degree implementation was taking place on the program that had been originally approved. How effective could you be, to what degree could you take this on? You could perhaps check things out and take corrective measures.

So I came to the decision to have these regional meetings across the country. It wasn't 1960 where you were trying to build a grassroots operation from whatever resources were available to you. You had easy access to key people in the urban areas, the local level, the activists, the labor leaders, the women's groups, all the people that had an affiliation with the Democratic Party. The best thing to do was to elicit from them directly, face to face, eyeball to eyeball, what was transpiring. I'd been there before, and I could make judgments. To do that nationally and assure it would impact required pretty rapid movement.

So I tried to locate these conferences and meetings in areas that would make it as convenient as possible to all the key operatives in the campaign. Operatives, incidentally,

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 2

that were running campaigns of candidates for governorship, Senate and House. Because of his intense interest, Johnson was extremely anxious to learn from me just what my findings were. That led to sort of a semi-humorous approach because we started sending memos back so he would be informed, but he wasn't getting them rapidly enough and finally we were dictating in the wee hours back to the White House, so he would have a report from me on that given day of these tours. I was concerned because obviously I had a lot of things going on the Hill. I was worried about losing the handle on some things, my then-current dealings with Wilbur Mills. Nevertheless, I was charged with this responsibility and I did what I could.

What he envisioned, what we both anticipated, was little concern regarding the presidential campaign, it was a walk-through. Consequently, there was a lack of registration activity, nuts and bolts activity to ensure maximizing get-out-the-vote, all of that. We weren't on the issues particularly; we were on the structure. So I guess there wasn't any great element of surprise there. There were a lot of activities presented to me at these meetings. Under intensive questioning, you found that there was great exaggeration as to what was being done. There were things that could be done or be done better which might be of help in maximizing the vote, so you tried to work on those, for example, distribution of material. That was an example. There was a great deal of material in warehouse storage which had not been distributed out of the DNC. Well, those are the things that you could take some steps to correct.

The Johnson campaign side of it, was just running along without any intensity, which was not a revelation. The [Barry] Goldwater campaign side, however, was to some extent a revelation, at least to me, because of the intensity of the Goldwater activists. Distribution of the literature, books and pamphlets occurred along with some pretty mean stuff out there [when] you got to the Clevelands and Detroit and San Franciscos around this country. You discovered that this rather narrow area of support for Goldwater had depth and commitment. It's comparable later on to the [George] McGovern campaign. Actually it was much the same. There weren't enough people out there to get the job done, but those that were committed were truly committed.

G: Why do you think that was?

O: Goldwater's campaigning had limited breadth of support. But they were ardent and had made impact, because I found comments concentrated in some areas more than others regarding books and pamphlets on the part of our own people. Their concern because of this was being discussed. It motivated us to do much more than had been done at grassroots on behalf of Lyndon Johnson. And that went to literature distribution to rev up registration where there was still time to develop relationships in campaign activity between labor and the Democratic Party structures. These meetings included all these elements, and there was a specific effort to ensure responsible presence of labor leaders along with our own people. And we made particular effort to enlist attendance of those who were engaged in local campaigns or statewide campaigns.

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 3

What contribution did it make to the overall result? I think it made a contribution. It did enlighten us; it did alert us to where we could take corrective measures. In summary, it turned out to be worth doing. But it certainly was a far cry from an in-depth organizational drive in which you would normally be engaged. That would have extended over a period of months and would have been very intensive, conducted in depth. This was more surface activity, but I think one of the contributions was to have the President feel more comfortable about things. Not that I was giving him assurances to make him comfortable, because I was pretty damn direct in my reports. Instead of giving him comfort some days, I gave him concern because I would report what I observed and what my findings were, and sometimes they weren't very pleasant to hear. He attempted his own implementation at his end by having [Walter] Jenkins and others in the White House in contact with the [Democratic] National Committee trying to stir up the troops.

G: Did it have any enduring impact on the way the national committee worked or was set up?

O: I don't think so, particularly. I think that we continued to follow the same course from Kennedy through Johnson, which I guess, with the exception probably of the [James] Farley era with Roosevelt, was pretty much the way things went. I don't know. I never checked back in the records or history of the party. It was damn unfortunate. The role of the Democratic National Committee should be a meaningful role when the party is in power, as well as a meaningful role when the party is out of power. My experience with the national committee both times I was chairman, it was the party out of power, and the national committee, therefore, did have a great opportunity to be active and effective. That depended on the chairman, whether he would be aggressive.

When the party is out of power, the only entity that focuses nationally is the national committee because the people on the Hill are interested in their own districts, their own states. On the political side, they are busily engaged in protecting their interests, and there's not a unified approach to the loyal opposition concept unless it's through the national committee. And if the national committee can enlist party leaders to be actively engaged with the committee, if the national committee can develop programs and have a battle plan and be vigorous and aggressive, then it can fulfill meaningfully the role of the loyal opposition.

But when you're in the White House--in the Kennedy period, very frankly, we probably lost sight of the existence of the national committee. It was a vehicle solely for us when negatives came along, appointments particularly, to put the burden on the national committee, occasionally have John Bailey, who was chairman, make an announcement "I'm sorry, but Joe Smith is not going to be named federal judge," or whatever. It was that sort of thing and there was little or no direction or guidance from the White House. There was no meaningful public support of the committee on the part of the President. And the same in the Johnson era.

G: Was the reason for Johnson's attitude different from Kennedy's?

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 4

O: No, I think you become so absorbed you're completely inundated with your own problems and activities. Another election isn't for a few years. You give it a fleeting thought now and then, but to be supportive of it so that it is performing meaningful tasks just didn't take place. For example, the national chairman should be an observable-to-the-press presence in the White House on a regular basis. That's first and foremost. Then there's an understanding that the chairman of the party does have access to the president. He is a spokesman for the president in the political area. It was an oversight on our part. There were occasions [when] something [would] come up: "Oh, well, let's get hold of Bailey," or "Let's have the national committee try to do something," for example, in organizing the senior citizens' meetings that we had at one stage to push Medicare.

It's somewhat similar to the secretary of state and the foreign policy adviser in the White House. The fact of the matter is you have political operatives in the White House. You could look to me with political experience in patronage or politics generally. In foreign policy you have the adviser and his staff right in your building. The secretary of state is in Foggy Bottom. Personalities have a lot to do with it. There's no question, for example, in the Nixon Administration that Henry Kissinger as foreign policy adviser undercut the secretary of state. In our administration, during the period of Dean Rusk and Mac [McGeorge] Bundy, there was some neglect of Dean Rusk, but there was a pleasant and easy relationship between the Secretary of State and the President. But the fact is that the President would turn to his foreign policy adviser, who is with him probably four or five times a day. He's there and you don't think of it in terms of a table of organization. He's there and his input is significant because of his opportunity for input and the opportunity for political input within the confines of the building is almost total. Why was Larry O'Brien, the special assistant to the president for congressional relations, out on the road in twenty-three meetings across the country involved directly in the political campaign when you have an entity called the Democratic National Committee down the street?

Now, let's not fault the DNC down the street, [Cliff] Carter and some of those Johnson people who were working over there. Nobody paid any attention. Why didn't Johnson say to them, "Get out on the road. I want to know--"? Now, maybe some of it had to do with his confidence in me, because he always thought I stole the nomination from him, or I was one of those who was involved. All I'm saying is that in the White House, your speech-writing resources, your press resources, your political resources, your congressional relations resources, your foreign policy resources, your legal resources are all present. In the case of Kennedy and Johnson, there was easy access day or night on the part of a half dozen of the key people. So the national committee is an entity for filing purposes and other purposes and perhaps funneling fund purposes. That's over there in election time, like Nixon's committee to re-elect Nixon was, I guess, a separate entity from the Republican National Committee.

We didn't do it right, and I felt responsibility because I had been there. I had more involvement in national politics than anybody in the White House, except the President of the United States, on the organizational side of it. So I had no excuse. I should have a

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 5

recognition that the national committee should be supported and upgraded to the fullest extent possible, not to please some personalities in the national committee, but to be an extremely useful adjunct to the presidency. Perhaps that was the case of Farley and Roosevelt, where Farley was postmaster general and for some period also national chairman. Farley had total access to the White House, and he was a cabinet member. I'm sure that worked out nicely until Farley decided he wanted to be president and Roosevelt decided to run for a fourth term.

G: Yes. Did Johnson expect you to put the Kennedy organization back in the field, do you think, in his behalf?

O: No, no. By that time, the Kennedy organization was not separated from the Democratic Party generally around the country. In Cleveland there were probably--undoubtedly--people in attendance at that meeting who I had become acquainted with because they were Kennedy supporters in 1960; there were other people who were elected officials of the party. And it would be a mix.

G: Did your trips around the country have any policy impact in terms of the way the issues that the campaign focused on?

O: The issues had been pretty well defined by Goldwater's position on most of the issues. He had taken care of that for us. No, basically what the President's concern was, "The polls show I'm going to win easily. I'd like to win as big as possible." But there's nothing to motivate the troops; everybody is saying, "Why bother?" And is there anything we can do about "why bother" to ensure we can get a few million more people to the polls, which would have an impact on the end result? We could win a little bigger. He'd like to win by getting 100 per cent of the vote.

G: One of the newspaper articles on your trips indicated that after your return the campaign emphasized the "man with his hand on the trigger" theme, the nuclear hazard issue. Was this something that you picked up in your trips around the country as being a--?

O: I don't think I had to take the trips around the country. I had dealt with Tony Schwartz on that. We had envisioned that approach prior to the trips around the country. I remember sitting with Tony in New York exchanging ideas by way of spots. If you remember, we were pretty hard-hitting, to the extent that they are still talking about the little girl with the daisy. You know, that is cited to this day. So what it amounted to was the finger on the trigger. Barry Goldwater just lent himself to that. It wasn't something that we pushed on Barry. His utterances were a little like--

G: Curtis LeMay.

O: Curtis LeMay--when we had the polling booth blow up in a spot. I can see it now; I can feel it. You're in that White House, the days go by, the weeks go by, and you're trying to promote legislation, Johnson's trying to keep the country on an even keel, and everybody

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 6

is busy doing whatever task they're assigned to. You get to the actual campaign and his personal involvement had to be limited. But how about the troops out there? We were in an excellent position to push and press and be a little bit rough about it, because everybody out there knew Lyndon Johnson was going to be in the White House and they better have the record show that they did their job.

G: Can you give me an example of how you could get rough in this respect?

O: Well, my comments would be pretty direct. I would, without even knowing the facts in Cleveland, to go back there for a moment, initially express my deep, abiding concern, which was also the concern of the President, about what we had determined was inadequacy in the operation of the campaign in the Cleveland area. I'd make that statement flat. You start on that tone, that I'm here because we're concerned. I represent the President, the candidate, and what we hear from Ohio and this vicinity is not good, and we want to tell you that we're unhappy. Those meetings were not nasty, but they were not patty cake. They were very direct and I would invariably express concern. I'm here to face up to this and I want you to face up to it with me, and you'd go on from there. That would be the tone.

G: Was voter registration discussed in these sessions?

O: Yes. And that varied from meeting to meeting, area to area, state to state, depending on the time frames of registration. By the time we got out on the road there were places where you just had run out of time. Voter registration, get-out-the-vote, and the record of the administration were not being appropriately disseminated. And their response to me meeting after meeting was identical: "We don't have material. We've pleaded for material." And that made a real impact on me because that was the case across the country. The fact is we had a warehouse full of material. But what they were attempting to do was to sell the material. The old story--it cost a thousand dollars to have this material printed; now we want two thousand dollars for that package of material to go to Sioux City, Iowa, and we'll make a thousand dollars for the committee. All of that, of course, was just falling on pretty deaf ears around the country. We got that material cranked out across this country in a matter of days and worried about who paid later. Their attitude, and rightly so, was we have a president in the White House and they want us to raise a couple of thousand dollars before they'll send us buttons or hand cards. That was really the hang-up.

G: So many of the memos do discuss that.

O: Then, too, we tried to be helpful if we could by making distributions to candidates in contested districts. It wasn't a great deal of money. But I remember I sent out four or five different people around the country to hand distribute contributions on behalf of the President, so they'd know that it came directly from him.

G: Was this a dual purpose gesture, not only to help them get re-elected, but--?

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 7

O: Oh, no, more the other way, just a little gesture to say, "Hey, we know what you've been doing for us."

G: Did it have implications for getting out the vote, too?

O: Hopefully it would help a little to get out the vote.

We covered a lot of ground in a very short period of time and we got as close as we could get to grassroots. We had to go to local leadership and that's as far as you could get if you were going to get anything done quickly. And as I say, I don't want to exaggerate the end result of it. It was a strong effort belatedly with a very limited time frame to stir the pot and we did stir it to some extent, but it certainly didn't have a major effect on the election results.

G: Were there any specific things that you did in terms of promoting the get-out-the-vote campaign other than the literature--?

O: No, other than going over their get-out-the-vote programs and making suggestions on further implementation. Invariably though, as you do in any campaign, you get to, "We could do a lot better if we had more money." And that's always tricky, saying, "We're short on the money." That's always in political campaigns. I'm sure your conversation with Louie Martin revealed that in that area there was a particularly unique approach to this.

G: At the time there was a lot of press speculation that you might replace John Bailey as chairman of the DNC.

O: At that time?

G: Yes. And later, too.

O: Yes, I guess there probably was. That seemed a natural. I think a lot of writers just made that basic assumption. I never had any conversations on that subject that I recall. At the beginning the idea the Kennedys had was to have Bailey chairman for what they expected would be a relatively brief period of time, then I would succeed him. But that was never formalized or discussed in any depth. It was referred to by Bobby and Jack with me on a couple of occasions, but in the Johnson period I don't recall any conversations of that [kind].

G: Really?

O: That speculation invariably would be entered into without any discussion with me. I don't recall reporters calling saying, "Now, I have this rumor. Will you confirm?" It was more, frankly, reporters figuring that O'Brien could probably better serve as chairman than

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 8

serving in the White House in congressional relations.

G: There were also rumors that you were going to leave and perhaps after the campaign even run for office yourself in Massachusetts. Did you--?

O: Yes.

G: This was late 1964, early 1965. People were urging you to run in--

O: For the Senate. That was the time when [Leverett] Saltonstall was up for re-election. I guess that's the period.

G: Yes.

O: And there were discussions with a number of people. Was that the time? That was later, wasn't it? I think Saltonstall was up in 1966. The reason I say that is when Johnson named me PMG at the Ranch, just before the press conference, Arthur Goldberg was urging me to go to Massachusetts and run for the Senate. Teddy Kennedy had urged me, also. It became a matter of discussion on the part of a number of people, and I gave it I guess serious thought. As it turned out, Kenny O'Donnell went back to Massachusetts and ran for governor. And as it turned out, Saltonstall didn't run; that's when [Edward] Brooke ran and was elected to the Senate from Massachusetts. He was the first black senator. I don't recall in 1964 but people would say, "You'd think you're such a political animal that you'd seek office." I had never seriously considered it, except that Senate contest. I can't say I ever seriously considered it, but it was brought to my attention and discussed with several friends.

G: Did the political side of things either as a candidate or as an organizer for someone else appeal to you more than the legislative work that you were doing?

O: I think the most meaningful experience I had over my years in politics or in government was in the legislative area in the White House. I found it more meaningful than being party chairman, even though I had always had a yen to be party chairman from the time I was a kid as a great admirer of Jim Farley. I felt that was the epitome of American politics. Therefore [in] my entire early years I never gave any thought to being an elected official, and I don't suggest that I sat dreaming about being national chairman either. But if you said to me, "What intrigues you the most about politics?"--as you know, I was engaged in politics from the time I was sixteen--it was the national chairmanship. And I think without question it was because Farley was unique and I admired him from afar. And then I became acquainted with Paul Butler when he was chairman in a very difficult time, when he was isolated by the Democratic Congress. But, with all of that and reflecting now, having spent a decade in the sports world, being involved as postmaster general, the most meaningful activity and the most rewarding to me personally was the period in the White House.

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 9

G: Is that right?

O: Yes. I feel that I accomplished something on behalf of the American people. I like to think that. But, you know, you could play a role of some degree of importance.

Tape 1 of 2, Side 2

O: Forget all the titles and all the rest of this, the fact is that that was the most significant part of my life. And as I reflect, I can't say that I didn't enjoy everything I've ever been engaged in. I was extremely fortunate to have a variety of opportunities, but the fact is that when you think of what you were involved with, in direct proximity to presidents, and what you could contribute to the legislative process and what the end result of that process could have on people, that was the most significant area that I was involved in.

G: Why did you decide not to run for office in Massachusetts?

O: I never envisioned myself, frankly, as being electable. I found that I could be a strong, aggressive advocate and that I could put my heart and soul into it. I had one great weakness and that was I was incapable of fund raising. I never had it in me to confront people and urge or cajole or demand campaign contributions. That was a basic, if you can call it that, weakness. I apply that to seeking elective office. And if I sought elective office, that lack of drive in that direction could be devastating. So I just felt that I wasn't the kind of guy who was electable. I had never had any interest in being a member of the House of Representatives. I'm sure that I would have enjoyed being a member of the Senate. But I wasn't sufficiently motivated to try and I didn't have confidence in myself that I could succeed if I did try. I had come up through political organization and I had opportunities which were intriguing, and that satisfied me. There was no way that I would have run against Saltonstall, even though I had reasonably high visibility in Massachusetts. In fact, there were polls conducted at some point. But I never got to the point where [I said] "I'm on the verge of this decision. Shall I or shall I not?" It never got that close. I just didn't think I was the kind of guy. Maybe I was wrong. If I was, then I guess that was the wrong decision in my life, but I don't think I was wrong.

G: Was there anyone in particular whose advice you sought when you were trying to decide whether or not to have a political career of your own?

O: No. I had a pretty good idea of Larry O'Brien in my own mind.

G: Okay.

O: Came close to being on the ballot there at one point as a stand-in for Lyndon B. Johnson in Massachusetts, but we'll get to that someday. I volunteered to do that.

G: This is in 1968, I assume. Okay, just a second.

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 10

(Interruption)

O: I know it's not on that list. Joe Napolitan wasn't in government and he had been with me in the Kennedy campaign, and is, I think, one of the most able fellows and political operatives I've ever known. He was with me throughout those meetings. He may have missed a couple of them because of his own business affairs. But he was the closest one to me in that activity.

G: Okay, let's talk about some specific problems in various states. One of them regarded Florida and [George] Smathers' vote on Medicare. Do you remember the tie there that-- apparently the two were linked?

O: In the campaign contest?

G: Yes, in 1964.

O: No, I don't.

G: Smathers had evidently been talking directly to LBJ and maybe trying to get some commitments from him about--

O: Yes. I just don't have any specific recollection. I'm trying to recall what kind of a contest that Smathers was involved in, or was he seeking re-election then?

G: I don't think he was--

O: No, I don't think so. I just don't know.

G: In Louisiana you had John McKeithen, the governor there, who was not enthusiastic about your ticket. Do you recall that situation?

O: Other than he wasn't enthusiastic, I didn't pursue it with him. We went about our business as far as activities in the state were concerned and ignored him. I don't know how Lyndon Johnson felt about him but I didn't feel he was worth the effort. He wasn't somebody I felt close to.

G: Apparently he was attempting to trade an endorsement of LBJ for a commitment from LBJ on the tidelands issue.

O: Yes, he was trying to deal. What he might be able to do with LBJ was one thing, but I wasn't interested in pursuing some deal with him. We went about our business, as I said.

G: There's some indication that LBJ used his campaign in Louisiana in 1964 to get Russell Long committed to Medicare. Do you recall the interaction here between legislation and

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 11

campaign?

O: There was [interaction]. Russell Long was an important target for us and whatever the President could do, not only in that campaign but on any other occasion, he endeavored to improve the relationship, all aimed at his ultimate support. Russell Long's support was very elusive.

G: Why was that?

O: Probably basically his own views. He wasn't as elusive as [Harry] Byrd, [Sr.], of Virginia, but--

G: Okay. Do you feel like there was an expanded women's role in this campaign? I know the O'Brien manual seemed to indicate that women were underused, that they didn't play as large a role as--

O: I think they remained underused in that campaign, too.

G: Really?

O: Yes.

G: Tell me about the women's organization of that campaign.

O: It wasn't much, as I recall it. In 1960 and 1964 there were attempts to encourage women's participation. But the leadership roles of women in campaigns were limited in those days.

This changed dramatically. We had had an unusual experience in women's activities in Jack Kennedy's campaign. That went back to his campaigns for the Senate in Massachusetts. There was, for those times, an inordinate amount of women's activity. They were attracted to him. And that brought a lot of women into our activity who were not active in politics. That was played to the hilt with the women's teas and receptions. And it was a happy situation, because you had a Rose Kennedy and daughters available for these women's activities. And the women enjoyed meeting them. They did a tremendous job of enlisting women and it was part of the original manual, because it was an obvious area of real potential. I've never seen anything like ten thousand women at a reception in the street struggling to get in.

(Laughter)

It was true in the presidential campaign, too. The jumpers and the screamers, we had names for them on the parade routes. Some of them jumped straight up, some of them jumped off the curb.

(Laughter)

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 12

- G: Well, you had both the women's division of the DNC and you had apparently a women's division of the Johnson for President group. Let me ask you to explain what each of those did.
- O: Their concentration was on women's activities. The women went their way to some extent; their activities were aimed at women rather than today where you don't have that sort of segregation.
- G: Were there two separate--let's say with reference with 1964, did the women's division of the DNC duplicate what the women of the--?
- O: I have a vague recollection.
- G: Well, wasn't that Margaret Price? Isn't that where she--?
- O: Yes. Incidentally, she was a very good campaigner, very effective. But I think that area was pretty much usurped by the Johnson women's activity.
- G: Oh, was it?
- O: Not purposely so, but it sort of just--
- G: And who headed that?
- O: Well, there were several Johnson women involved. Liz [Carpenter] was very much involved.
- G: Lindy Boggs.
- O: Lindy Boggs.
- G: Scooter Miller, wasn't she?
- O: Yes, I was thinking of Scooter. Bess Abell. She was very good. But it was basically the women who had prior campaign experience with LBJ, added to it of course were women from state to state. I'd have to go back over the list. There was a national committeewoman in each state. In some states they were very good and in some states they weren't, like state chairmen or national committeemen, for that matter. But Margaret Price was the woman who traveled with us in 1960 to the regional meetings representing the women's division. She was the spokesperson for women's activity in the Kennedy campaign. She was very competent. Geri Joseph was extremely good, too. Geri Joseph really was [with Hubert] Humphrey out of Minnesota. And there was a woman from Wisconsin that I brought aboard in the national committee full-time--Mary Lou Berg. She was very impressive in Wisconsin and I persuaded her to come to Washington as a full-

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 13

time, salaried vice chairman of the national committee. She stayed on after I left, and ultimately Carter appointed her to a commission.

G: You indicated the appeal that Jack Kennedy had for women voters and organizers. What about LBJ, did he have a--?

O: Well, it wasn't comparable.

G: Nothing of the same--

O: No, it wasn't the same climate. I don't know how to describe it. The women active in LBJ's campaign had the basic motivation that, "We ought to do more for more people," the same motivation we all had. With Jack Kennedy there was that added element of excitement he created. I don't want to belittle that. It was very helpful and they were very, very enthusiastic.

G: One activity that women engaged in was that whistle-stop through the South.

O: Yes. That was extremely well done, and the people we've mentioned were key people. Of course, Mrs. Johnson was the catalyst for all of this activity and they were very effective, and it was extremely well done and very meaningful. I was not directly involved in that. That really was probably the highlight organizationally of the campaign.

G: Oh, really, how so? Why do you say that?

O: Well, I think it was better handled, well conceived, plenty of planning, and the time frame was well thought out. What we've been talking about was rather hastily conceived activity. But it was well received, enthusiastically received, and was a significant plus. What I'm saying is it probably was the best example of an organized national effort in the campaign.

G: Any reason why? Was it who was planning it or--?

O: Yes, I think the competency of the group, Mrs. Johnson's leadership. You have to remember that Mrs. Johnson was a significant plus. She was held in high regard and then you had Muriel Humphrey.

G: How do you gauge the effectiveness of something like the whistle-stop? What measures--?

O: The concept was like a candidate's tour. Even with the advent of television and its impact on campaigns, that personal touch motivates, arouses enthusiasm, leaves in its wake a real plus. It's something that people who work in campaigns appreciate, too. You make these personal appearances, you have motorcades, you make contact with people who are playing significant roles in your campaign locally.

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 14

I've always said election night is the World Series, the Super Bowl, and the NBA playoffs combined. The stakes are unbelievably high. In victory and defeat, it is almost beyond comprehension. At the [Kennedy] Compound in 1960--with Hubert Humphrey through the night in 1968--in the midst of a decision being made by millions and millions which is going to have a tremendous impact on the nation, of course, on the people there and that one fellow there with you.

Election night at the Compound after an effort that had extended over two years was intensive. But the feeling, as the polls closed in the East and you were preparing to start taking the returns, that the victory was yours, that the Gallup and Harris polls had closed over the last seventy-two hours to a relatively narrow plus for Jack Kennedy from what had been a more comfortable position for several weeks to find as the night wore on that it became more and more a possibility you were going to face defeat, not victory, into the hours of the morning. I can't describe it. It extends beyond anything I can envision in terms of impact.

And that night with Hubert, the early results indicated a very close election. As it turned out, it was a very close election. Then the climate is different, because you went into that election night basically accepting defeat. There was little hope for victory though the polls had narrowed in the last seventy-two hours. We were talking about personal appearances and tours and whistle stops. Hubert had come out of Texas and California with massive crowds and great enthusiasm the last seventy-two hours. I flew with him to Minneapolis. On the plane, I must say, for the first time in the campaign there were some smiles and the feeling that maybe a miracle is going to take place. And you went into the wee hours of the morning before you conceded defeat. You know, it's quite an experience to be intimately involved in something like that.

So we were saying, "Does it mean anything to travel the highways and byways of America in this day and age, when they say you lean on media and package your candidate and have so-called professional promoters handle campaigns? I still am not a believer in that. I still think grassroots enthusiasm and interest, if it can be engendered, is very significant. You can misjudge though, because in the Kennedy campaign the crowds were fantastic. I still see those hundreds of thousands in Ohio, Cincinnati, Cleveland, and then I remember the results coming in from Ohio that night where we lost big. So you can delude yourself with all that, but by the same token I think it is an essential part of the American political process, and always will be. I'm not happy with what has happened--more and more packaging impacts on the ultimate decision. That human element, the saving aspect, is the debate format that Kennedy and Nixon initiated.

You were talking about the women's division and women's activities in 1964, the unique aspect of women's activities in 1960. And now you go beyond 1964 to some women's activities in the Democratic Party that I found counterproductive. I probably am more sensitive to it than many because I was chairman during part of that period and I found them devoid of understanding of team effort or goals that could be achieved. Some

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 15

presented an image to the American people, and particularly American women, that was negative, and I think set back the women's movement considerably.

G: Was this in the 1972 McGovern campaign?

O: Yes. You had that period, but now you move on to normalcy as you'd like to see it, women seeking elective office successfully, women in leadership roles, a woman on the Supreme Court; that is real progress. You had to go through these phases. Women's rights were neglected for decades. But the advocates who captured Eastern Establishment media centers were unfortunate leaders at that time, but that's no longer the case. Now you find in Nebraska both nominees for governor are women. And I think it's great. The women of 1964, Mrs. Johnson and those associated with her, Muriel Humphrey and those associated with her, belonged to a different era. They were involved for the same reasons that men were involved.

Now, you have the abortion struggle and right-to-life and NOW, but even with that, I think there's much more attention directed by women to the problems of the nation and the challenges to the nation. Women are more involved and motivated to be activists in politics than existed in my earlier days. And that's a natural evolution. I've never taken to groups that have one single, limited objective and to hell with everything else. Either you're with them or against them. If you're not with them twenty-four hours a day for a lifetime, you're against them. All other matters that impact on all of us are ignored. This new era's involvement on the part of women is very healthy for the country.

G: You talked about election night in 1960 and 1968. Let me ask you to go into some detail on your memories of 1964.

O: [In] 1964 I wasn't with Johnson on election night.

G: Where were you?

O: I was in Washington. But we talked two or three times during the course of the evening. He called and we talked on the phone.

G: Do you recall the conversation?

O: Updating the election returns of the moment, projections that we both had heard or what it looked like in terms of the total electoral vote. He was excited; so was I. But it's not the same if you're not with the candidate. We were going to win with 56 per cent of the vote, 58 per cent; you're going to carry forty-seven states, as I thought he would, or forty-four as he did, whatever it was. There's an ingredient missing. The drama is far different when you have a candidate in a close situation for the highest office in the world.

G: Do you think that Johnson created a goal for himself, trying to surpass Roosevelt's record?

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 16

- O: It entered his mind. There were references to what Roosevelt had done. That's normal. You reach a position where it isn't whether you're going to win, but how big. At that point you would like to set some records. You might be the batting champion this year, but if you didn't hit over .400 you haven't topped Ted Williams.
- G: Was the space program an issue in 1964? Was there a feeling that Goldwater would cut back on the space program?
- O: The overriding issue in 1964 was very simply, in one word, Goldwater. Public attitude was this fellow Johnson has been president a brief period of time. He's entitled to have a real swing at this. That's number one and that's a terrific plus. Then the opponent is making what are conceived to be some statements that scare you. We encouraged the scare side of it. The campaign issue was Goldwater and the finger on the trigger, if there was an issue. There were two: one, Lyndon Johnson seems a good guy doing a good job, he hasn't had much opportunity to get the job done and there's no reason why you shouldn't let him have a full term. And even if you didn't feel strongly that way, look at the alternative; the alternative scares the hell out of me. So you put those factors together and you have a nice situation for yourself.
- G: Was there a Republican thrust aimed at limiting this get-out-the-vote campaign that you've spoken of?
- O: To some extent voting rights legislation has changed the procedure of registration--the elimination of poll tax requirements and all that. But from the time I was a kid through these campaigns we're talking about, the Democratic Party at all levels would make an effort to register people. The Republican Party would make an effort to put roadblocks in the way of registration or maintain existing roadblocks. That has been the course of the two-party system's history. The Democrats would fare better if they could get more people registered because inevitably a significant majority of those people would vote Democratic. The Republicans knew that higher registration, including ethnic groups, and massive black registration would be negative to the Republican Party.

So voter registration was always greatly emphasized by the Democrats, and avoidance of registration was emphasized on the Republican side. I remember the battles; we were always trying to get postcard registration, easy access, longer hours, all of that. And the Republicans would fight every bit of it, make it as difficult as they could. It's a little reminiscent of my earliest days in politics when there was a mayor of Boston, James Michael Curley, whom the Republicans abhorred. There was no way you could defeat James Michael Curley for mayor of Boston. A Republican governor, a Republican legislature in Massachusetts, passed a law that the mayor of Boston could not succeed himself. The mayor of every other city in Massachusetts could succeed himself. That was the way to get rid of Curley, but he fooled them and he became governor before he ultimately wound up in jail. The approach in the history of the Republican Party is to limit the opportunity to vote.

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 17

G: You were saying that others you had to seek out.

O: My initial involvement was first get them registered and then secondly get them to the polls. That was the name of the game and the numbers were there, but the percentage of voter participation was extremely low compared to the establishment. So that was the battle.

G: There was an Operation Eagle Eye that the Republicans had that year. Do you know anything about that?

O: Well, that was some group that toured the country observing Democratic meetings and appearances. Is that the one?

G: I don't know.

O: Yes, they may have been called Operation Eagle Eye--this was going to be Truth in Campaigning. They would follow the candidates and call a press conference immediately following appearances. They created a little publicity and a little interest.

The Republican attack, or attempt, on LBJ in 1964 really was a personal one. There was little or nothing to attack him on in terms of his record. So they had to personalize the attack or try to.

G: Okay. Now, the victory gave you not only a four-year term for LBJ but a big majority in the Congress. Did you have any idea that you were going to get this kind of a landslide?

O: No, in my wrap-up I gave to the President, I tried to project district by district, state by state, Senate contest by Senate contest, along with the presidential election. And my projection on the Senate side was that there would be a net gain of three seats, and we had a net gain of two. On the House side, I projected a net gain of at least seventeen, and it was a conservative projection. I wanted to be conservative and probably had in my mind a maximum of twenty-five. Actually it extended to thirty-three, thirty-five or something like that. We were envisioning some improvement in the Senate, and that wasn't overriding because we were in pretty good shape anyway. A swing in the House could really make a big difference, because that's where most of our problems were, combating the House Rules Committee and trying to break down the coalition. The result in 1964 gave us that direly needed elbowroom and provided us with an opportunity to move more aggressively. A reflection of those election results was the immediate action in the House to liberalize the procedure on the twenty-one-day rule.

Overnight you could see the result. There were occasions when the twenty-one-day rule was put into effect. But more than that, bills moved out of the Rules Committee because they had to anticipate they would be taken from them. You didn't have this horrible delay, the road was just made much smoother, and Lyndon Johnson seized that opportunity. The net result was the Great Society program.

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 18

G: You indicated before we turned on the tape that initially he was apprehensive about supporting that reform.

O: Yes. We had gone through that enlargement of the Rules Committee battle in 1961, and it was a very hairy experience. If we got into the battle on House procedure, it could stir up a lot of enmity and create a climate at the outset that would be counterproductive.

I don't recall that he was at all adamant about going for it. He was concerned and we discussed it. It was suggested by some columnist that I prevailed upon them to move in that direction and urged action. I don't recall that it took that kind of prevailing. Yes, he was concerned, and maybe I was, too. But you seize the opportunity, and there it was. They knew on the Hill that even if you didn't have the twenty-one-day rule or the other change we were probably going to be in pretty good shape in any event. It turned out to be a relatively easy change.

G: Another development after this election was apparently at a cabinet meeting that was held two weeks after the election. He read a statement urging them to put their very best people in the departmental congressional liaison spots.

O: Yes.

G: I think the statement was something to the effect that he considered it the most important job in the department except for the cabinet officer himself.

O: And he did. That's the way he felt about it.

G: Let me ask you to give me the background of that statement.

O: Well--

G: Sounds like something you might have been involved in.

O: First of all, as vice president, Johnson was intimately acquainted with my department and how it functioned. He recognized the procedures and all of that. And when he asked me to stay on, the whole thrust was to do exactly what I'd been doing, and "I'm going to give you every element of support in that effort that I can, to upgrade it, to further emphasize it." That was part of the conversations we had.

As part of this whole thing--I don't know whether to get into it now or not, but we can--along with a couple of Kennedy stalwarts who were very close to Kennedy, Dave Powers and Ken O'Donnell, I had submitted my resignation after the President was elected. We felt it was appropriate--and I certainly was a staunch advocate--to stay with the President from the time of the assassination through the election and do the best job we could. He was operating through that period with really a dual staff overlapping, not

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 19

in my area, but overlapping with O'Donnell and Sorensen. It clearly wasn't something that could or should continue. If the President felt some personal reservations about suggesting changes because he felt some loyalty to us, it was our feeling that the best thing to do was to submit resignations without creating any problems for him at all. And that was done.

He accepted Ken's resignation, accepted Dave's resignation, and then asked Jack Valenti to meet with me to discuss what he might be able to do to be helpful to Dave, because Ken was going on his own. That developed into a conversation that Jack and I had that he relayed to the President that brought Dave into the Kennedy Library.

But with me, he wasn't accepting and it presented difficulties. I recognized that the New Frontier program, the portions not enacted, would now be folded into the Johnson program along with his own proposals. The change in the House obviously was going to make my successor's life a lot easier than my life had been. But overridingly I didn't want the President, who had indicated that he was happy with my work, to feel any obligation. So clear the deck and do it in an appropriate manner.

So he asked me to sit down with him to discuss it. He couldn't understand why I would leave now. After the struggle of four years, the opportunity presents itself to complete Jack Kennedy's program. And [he said] didn't I feel some responsibility in his memory and my long association with him? And he carried on from there. He assured me that he would support everything I did in congressional relations. As he said often, he's available twenty-four hours a day. I understood all he was saying and his motivation.

So we reached an agreement. I didn't mean to be arrogant, but I certainly had a lot of nerve to be making an agreement with the President of the United States, on my terms. The agreement was that I would stay through that session--whenever the session ended--with the proviso that [the fact that] I had submitted my resignation would be publicly known, so it wouldn't be misrepresented later; that he and I would close out the subject and it would not be reopened again, and that at the end of the session we would handshake goodbye. And that was agreed to.

Part of this conversation was that, by God, he was going to put the wood to the cabinet, and his staff would be instructed that anything that I asked them to do they were to do it. That was a priority. The best people available in the administration would be involved and cabinet members would be held accountable at all times for the progress of their legislation. As you know, with that I incurred the enmity of some who thought I should not have stayed with Lyndon Johnson.

G: Did Ken O'Donnell understand your situation, do you think?

O: I think that there was--not that we ever had words--sort of a break, not any meanness, not any exchanges but a rupture. Some of his friends had negative comments regarding me, and on one occasion my administrative assistant Claude Desautels was taken to task in a

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 20

restaurant. He was distraught when a couple of them told him what they thought of him still being with me and with Johnson. I ignored that. The staunchest advocate that I remain in my position with Johnson was Bobby Kennedy, who came to me and urged me to stay. He said that he understood that the President was interested in my staying and he, Bobby Kennedy, thought it was absolutely the right thing to do, which I very much appreciated.

So you moved on to upgrade the process. The legislative program was always on the agenda at cabinet meetings in the Kennedy period and even greater emphasis was personally placed on it by the President, as well as on cabinet accountability.

G: The cabinet departments became more responsible for individual pieces of legislation in 1965 than they had been, say, the previous--

O: No, the responsibility had always been there, but the accountability--

G: Oh, I see.

O: --was revved up. The same procedure continued--the weekly reporting to me, my summary of the reports to the President, the meetings in the Fish Room [of] the congressional relations people. There were occasions when the President dropped in unannounced to those meetings and sat in. The development of flow charts for the leadership breakfasts.

G: Did Johnson feel that this was the time to maximize his effort, in 1965? Was this--?

O: Yes. You would launch it with the most meaningful domestic proposal that had been hanging around for years: Medicare. You'd move with Medicare first: HR 1 and S 1, the first legislative proposal of the new Congress. You would move as rapidly and as aggressively as you could. Move everything as fast as you could. That was the approach.

I had never had to question whether he read my weekly legislative report. He would with great vigor pursue the agenda that I prepared for the leadership breakfasts; he would appropriately emphasize the progress, or lack of it, of the legislative program at cabinet meetings. He would be available to do anything in that area. You try to limit and husband his activities so they would be meaningful when he was engaged. The record shows it was done.

G: To what extent was this upgrading that he urged the cabinet members to proceed with? Was it a question of replacing the men in the positions with more senior, more capable people, or was it a question of upgrading to under secretary or assistant secretary level the men who were already--?

O: No, not the latter so much. It was due notice to them that whoever was responsible for congressional relations better be the best guy they could find or they were going to [be]

O'Brien -- Interview X -- 21

held accountable. If things bogged down in the Department of Agriculture, then the White House would be taking another look at the ability of not only the secretary of agriculture but the congressional relations fellow and he was going to be in trouble. And it was up to him to get the best. What position the fellow held, assistant secretary, wasn't nearly as important as the fellow's ability and capacity. He must be the best on your staff.

G: Was this successful in getting better people in the congressional liaison and did you feel like there was improvement?

O: As a group, they were effective from the beginning. There wasn't a cabinet member who didn't respond immediately to my phone call from day one, because Jack Kennedy had done the same thing. The style was different, but he had made it clear to the Hill. When he became president there was a tendency on the part of some to try to deal directly with him. He would always ask, "Have you discussed this with Larry?" "Well no." "You ought to talk to Larry about this." That was helpful. In thirty days I was accepted throughout that Hill, the word was out: this guy does speak for the President, he has the President's support, open the doors to him.

Now, with Lyndon Johnson, it was a matter of style; he was more direct. Jack Kennedy might not have said to the cabinet, "Now, I expect you to have the best man." The assumption would be that with the kind of accountability we had initiated, which had never existed before, you would have to be pretty dumb not to know that this was top priority. Lyndon Johnson thrust himself into this. On occasions when we had a setback-- I've told that story--it epitomized the Johnson attitude toward the legislative program. I waited until he was awake to tell him we had lost the roll call. He wanted to know what time it happened. I replied it was four o'clock, and "Well, you should have called me right then, because if you're bleeding up there, Larry, I want to bleed with you. We're together in this." He said, "You shouldn't wait"-- (Laughter) which is quite--

But anyway, I went along about my business and later on Johnson had great fun adhering to the handshake agreement but finding another direction to take. He never brought up the subject again. Only after the fact, after I was postmaster general, he reminded me that I was to keep my office in the White House, too. That's when I suggested to him that Henry Hall Wilson replace me. He held Henry in high regard but he was not going to make a change. So he got his way, and I haven't a moment's regret. It was a great period. I recalled Bobby saying "Stay, for God's sakes, this is where you belong."

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview X

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY
AND
JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of Lawrence F. O'Brien

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Lawrence F. O'Brien of New York, New York, do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of the personal interviews conducted on September 18, October 29, October 30, December 4, December 5, 1985; February 11, February 12, April 8, April 9, June 25, July 24, July 25, September 10, September 11, November 20, November 21, December 17, December 18, 1986; April 22, April 23, June 18, June 19, July 21, July 22, August 25, August 26, September 23, September 24, November 3, November 4, December 10, December 11, 1987 at New York, New York and Cotuit, Massachusetts and prepared for deposit jointly in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

- (1) The transcripts shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library.
- (2) The tape recordings to which the transcripts relate shall be in the possession of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and shall not be available for use or review of or by any source during my lifetime and for a period of time thereafter ending with the 10th year anniversary of the date of my death. At such time, access to the tape recordings by researchers shall be permitted but only for the limited purpose of background use, and researchers may not cite, paraphrase, or quote therefrom under any circumstances.
- (3) During my lifetime, I retain all copyright in the material given to the United States by the terms of this instrument. Thereafter the copyright in the transcripts shall pass to the United States Government. During my lifetime, researchers may publish brief "fair use" quotations from the transcripts without my express prior consent in each case, but no other quotations from the transcripts shall be published, except with my express prior approval in writing.
- (4) Copies of the open portions of the interview transcripts, but not the tape recordings, may be provided by the library to researchers upon request, subject to the terms, conditions and restrictions set out herein.
- (5) Copies of the interview transcripts, but not the tape recordings, may be deposited in or loaned to research institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library or the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, subject to the terms, conditions and restrictions set out herein.

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

Accepted by Donald Wilson, Archivist of the United States, April 25, 1990.

Original Deed of Gift on file at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 2313 Red River, Austin, TX 78705.

ACCESSION NUMBER 92-21