

## INTERVIEW XIV

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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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O: [The Higher Education Act of 1965] considerably broadened the areas of the involvement. For the first time, it was to provide for undergraduate scholarships. It got into a controversial teacher corps proposal, which was not in the initial presentation but was something Gaylord Nelson and Ted Kennedy had an interest in. That became the single most controversial aspect.

G: Why was it controversial?

O: It was innovative--to develop a corps of teachers which would compensate for neglect of the past. That again went to race. They thought there might be some exclusivity racially and there was resentment. The Teacher Corps was a new concept. It had not been in the initial proposal and it emanated from liberal members, so that set the stage for a battle.

About everything that was proposed with additional federal involvement in funding facilities and the loan program, including the Teacher Corps, was incorporated in the final version of the bill. I don't recall the bill being tremendously controversial, but there was a fair amount of action at the committee level in both houses. It fitted rather nicely into our overall Great Society program and it complemented elementary-secondary, the whole field of education. There again you had a president who was totally committed. It worked out well.

G: Was the Teacher Corps idea inspired by the Peace Corps, do you think?

O: To some extent, the concept, yes. People on the Hill were constantly seeking ways and means to compensate in terms of neglect and unfairness over a long period of time. So when you got to education, [there was] the recognition that this neglect had been extremely harmful to a major segment of our society. While you were engaged to bring about equal rights and equal opportunity, if you were not able to develop significant federal involvement to improve the quality of education, it was rather pointless to be pursuing other elements of equal rights.

That was a very strong point of view that all of us in the White House shared. This extends beyond just talking about quality education. You've got to develop innovative programs and put significant funding into areas that will move to close this

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void. In the Teacher Corps, you were going to get a group of dedicated people who were going to plunge into these areas. I don't think we envisaged it as a quick fix, but an area for which we had great responsibility.

G: Did opponents see this as a federal encroachment on local control?

O: That tune was played--encroachment on local control. The sensitivity [towards that] in the field of education would be greater than it would be in some other areas. There were contentions that this was an incursion into local control. Education is more sensitive so that pitch would have more impact. The fact is that, there again, it was to a great extent an attempt to divert attention [to] try to muddy the waters. [It was] well meaning on the part of some but didn't, as we saw it, have any great merit. There were protective elements in the bill; you weren't forcing [it] down the throat. You had local compliance, and cooperative effort was a requirement.

G: Another element of the proposal was a loan guarantee program that the White House lobbied hard for. Do you recall the issues on that one?

O: As I recall, the ABA [American Bankers Association] lobbied hard against it, feeling that by this guarantee program you were going to limit the bankers. You were going to inhibit them, lessen their potential profit. They were pretty tough about it, and Edith Green took on the job of trying to negotiate with the ABA, but I don't remember the details.

G: Was Edith Green an ally on this bill?

O: She was an ally in terms of portions of it.

G: Do you recall dealing with her and--?

O: If you go back to Edith on [the] Elementary and Secondary [Education Act], Edith had problems with some of this legislation. Her problems went really to her concern about ensuring the separation of church and state. There was some element of concern on the part of any aid that might directly or indirectly go to private schools. She didn't want those barriers. It was clear that you have to maintain the separation. In that context we were able to work out accommodations which didn't violate the constitutional provisions in Elementary and Secondary, and in [the] Higher Education [Act], a lot of the funding that had gone for facilities, there had been sensitivity. My recollection is that you had a rigid limitation on facilities in terms of the nature of the facilities and that this bill called for considerable broadening of that.

G: There were also efforts to make a tuition tax credit part of the bill, which LBJ opposed.

O: He opposed it, not on the merits but on the realities. [That's] very, very controversial, always has been and still is. That could well have undermined the bill.

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- G: Was this controversial from the standpoint of its implications for desegregation or from its implications on fiscal policy?
- O: It had elements of private versus public. The debate on tax credits has taken any number of forms and there's been advocacy of recent vintage--and some elements of bipartisan support, but it doesn't fly. The continuing problem of what to do with people who choose private education yet as taxpayers pay for public education, that's been a matter of great controversy. At the elementary and secondary levels you get into the bitter opposition of the teachers unions. So that's a pretty darn sensitive area. It's troublesome because no one has come up with a reasonable and fair resolution. I think the prevailing feeling--probably still is--[is that] you have the right of choice; you expend significant amounts of money to have your children attend private schools, some of them religious and some not, but private schools. That's the choice you make and there shouldn't be any credit given in relieving you of your burden to maintain the cost of public education as a taxpayer. I was never clear in my own mind as we got into these matters all those years. We didn't get into all that at the higher education level. In terms of facilities, private institutions have the same benefits as any other institutions. It came [about] because private institutions are considered to be state universities. So you didn't have these debates and discussions that you had at the elementary-secondary level.
- G: Some of the Republican members of the House Education and Labor Committee complained that the methods used in steering the bill through committee were heavy-handed and that there was in essence a move to sort of dictate from the White House what would be in the bill, [that there was] virtually no input from the Republicans--?
- O: Yes, that complaint was made on a number of bills.
- G: But in this one, it--
- O: In this instance, I think there was a greater degree of frustration because they seemed to be unable to create controversy and disruption or watering down or defeat of any elements of this bill. The bill moved rather smoothly, as I'm sure the record indicates. The smoothness would be considered by some as evidence of White House dictation and demand. We did play a strong game and I guess there are times when you could consider that it could be interpreted as being heavy-handed. But we were comfortable with it.
- G: Was [Adam Clayton] Powell himself in this particular bill, working as an agent of the White House or did he have his own--?
- O: Basically, he was cooperating with the White House. We should again mention that Adam was not an opponent of the White House in the Kennedy and Johnson period. The problem with Adam was to get his attention. He had some games he played here and there. He'd like to get a little project for Harlem, that sort of thing, and he was flamboyant in his general conduct. But our frustration with Adam Powell was his inability to maintain

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a schedule, to call committee meetings, to be available. On this bill, I don't recall that Adam was anything but cooperative. It's well to note that: when you have the Adam Powell problems, it went to Adam Powell and his lifestyle.

G: In reviewing the legislation that was passed in 1965, which bill do you identify as being the greatest triumph from a standpoint of legislative tactics or marshaling support?

O: I don't know as I could respond definitively to that. I think you'd probably do a one, two, three of civil rights, Medicare, and education generally.

G: Which one do you think you expended the most effort on?

O: Medicare. I think by this session of Congress, my recollection was that meaningful civil rights legislation was inevitable. Well, maybe you'd have to hyphenate civil rights-Medicare, in expending effort. I think one of the breakthroughs we had, not in terms of widespread public impact, was the breakthrough in elementary-secondary education. I was very pleased that you could achieve a meaningful breakthrough in elementary-secondary education. [It seemed] the problem was unresolvable. I'll never forget sitting with the members of the National Catholic Welfare Conference and the NEA in my office, assigning [them] various members of Congress in a joint effort to lobby. And I remember in the midst of that meeting just wondering whether I was dreaming, whether this was actually occurring--that's how difficult it was.

So I don't think I'd want to say that civil rights [legislation], which took a hundred years, or Medicare which took thirty at least [didn't require great effort]. Elementary-secondary didn't take thirty because nobody had the concept of the federal role in elementary-secondary probably thirty years before this enactment. I think the record shows that that was an extremely difficult package to put together. There were certain [pieces of legislation where] maybe it was not realistic but I had that feeling of inevitability--I remember it clearly with civil rights and Medicare. In fact, I use that phrase time after time: "Medicare, it's as sure as tomorrow morning's sunrise." It's going to happen and the AMA and everybody else could accept that. Whether they're going to accept it today, tomorrow, next week, next month, or next year, they're going to accept it. There's just no way it isn't going to happen. And with civil rights, of course [I felt] similarly. Elementary-secondary, I wouldn't have said that it was inevitable until that breakthrough.

G: Which one do you think Lyndon Johnson regarded as the most significant piece of legislation?

O: Of course we know that he was wedded to civil rights and wedded to Medicare, that's a given. I think probably what might not have been noted is his commitment to education, [his] broad-based commitment to quality education at all levels. That was a commitment I noted in discussions over the years, which might not have penetrated among those in the field of education. This guy's committed to quality education, and that was very

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impressive to me. We were all committed to civil rights [and] all committed to Medicare. That wasn't a matter of questioning commitment. But in education, particularly at the elementary-secondary level, that was conceived by many as an impossibility and there was no way you could overcome the barriers. From my personal observations of the man, my feeling is that historians haven't noted how deep his commitment was in that field.

G: Okay, let's shift gears. I want to ask you to discuss your cabinet appointment. You do talk about that in your book [*No Final Victories*], but I think that it would be good for you to go into it in some detail.

O: It goes to the agreement that the President and I made regarding my extension of time in the White House. We have discussed that in some detail, and the commitment was to stay through that session of Congress. With the added strength that we had on the Hill as a result of the elections, with] the remaining significant areas of the New Frontier program, the goals [that] had not been fulfilled [and] the emergence of a broad-based Great Society program, the President had said to me he felt I should have a sense of personal responsibility to Jack Kennedy and a recognition of the need for continuity and [he hoped I would] stay on. The result was [my agreement] to stay on for that session and that we would not discuss the matter any further.

So there was no discussion and we went about our business. We were sitting in the Oval Office one day and there was a special meeting of the Democratic leadership. The President was sitting at the head of this group that included [Carl] Albert, [John] McCormack and the others. Out of nowhere, he looked at me and said, "Larry, you know I'm going to win. I'm going to win." And then he went back to the subject. Well, nobody knew what it meant. Albert was sitting next to me and he whispered, "What was that?" I said, "I don't have any idea. I don't know what he's talking about." After the meeting I thought about it again because it was a very unusual, peculiar comment to make. It wasn't in context at all. And I thought fleetingly, my God, is he talking about our agreement? But that ended that and there was no further discussion.

Then at a later time, there was a coffee and danish meeting in the White House one morning that involved a number of members of Congress. It was a briefing session by some[one]; I don't remember now. It was an 8:00 a.m. briefing; it did not relate to the legislative program, and so [I didn't attend]. That was unusual because, well, any time there were members of Congress present I'd be present. But for some reason I just didn't think about going to it. I was at home and I got a call from Jack Valenti. He said, "The President asked me to call you. Are you coming to this session?" I said, "I didn't plan to, Jack. You know it really doesn't relate--." "Well," he said, "the President thinks you ought to be here. If you could make it at least for part of the session I think you should," something to that effect. I said, "Okay, fine. I was just about ready to go to the White House anyway."

So I went to the last half of it and it ended, and we were standing around talking. I was talking to Dean Rusk and others. The President was circulating. I noted that he

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stopped and stared at Rusk and me. He came over. Rusk and I were talking about the foreign aid bill currently on the Hill. The President said, "What are you fellows talking about? What are you discussing?" And we said, "The foreign aid bill." He said, "Oh." He was then trying to leave, go down the hall to the East Room for a press conference. Not all press conferences were held in the East Room but this one was.

So everybody left, and I went to my office. It hit me when I got [to] the office that there was something strange. I don't know why but I thought, "Is it conceivable that in some way I'm involved in that press conference?" I thought back: Valenti's call, his concern about what Rusk and I might be discussing. I turned on my television set to watch the press conference, and [after] the routine press conference, I thought to myself, "How did that ever come into my mind?"

So some time elapsed and I was sitting [in my office] one afternoon late in the week. I was meeting with Mary McGrory, the columnist, and the presidential phone rang. The President said, "Do you have a minute? I'd like to visit with you." I said to Mary McGrory, "Excuse me, the President wants to see me." Well, Mary, being the tenacious gal she always was, said, "I'll wait until you come back so I can finish this interview." I said, "I don't think you should, Mary, because I have no idea how long I'll be and we can pick this up later." Well, she was going to stay.

So I went into the Oval Office and the President was looking at the tickers and he had his back to me. It was clear he knew I was there but he didn't turn around. Finally, to break the silence I said, "Mr. President, what have you got there, good news or bad news?" referring to his focus on the tickers. He said, "Well, a little bit of both, perhaps." And he said, "Sit down a minute. I want to tell you, which I think you know, that I think you've done a good job," et cetera, et cetera. And he said, "However, when I came to Washington, I ran an elevator on the Hill, had to work myself up. I was an administrative assistant to a congressman and so were you. And I went on and I was a member of Congress." I was listening to all of this. He said, "What I've always liked about you is"--something to the effect that "you don't seek recognition. You do your job. You really made an impact." I figured he can't have anything else to do to be sitting, giving me all this. Then he said, "But the time has come. I have made up my mind that you deserve recognition and it's grossly unfair that you're not being recognized in a meaningful way. Now," he said, "we're going to discuss all this at the Ranch. I'm going to the Ranch right after this discussion. I want you to come down tomorrow. Bring Elva down and, by the way, bring your son down. I like him. He ought to come down, too. There'll be a plane at Andrews and we can discuss [this], but I want to tell you that I am naming you postmaster general of the United States. We'll talk about it down at the Ranch and I'll see you because I want to get started."

I'm absolutely bowled over and really can't comprehend this. I go back to my office and on the way back, I thought, "Postmaster general? We have a postmaster general." There's Mary McGrory, with my secretary in the outer office. I was in such a state, trying to figure out what had hit me, that I said to Mary, "I can't continue this

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discussion." She said, "Oh, it won't be but just a few minutes." I said, "I can't, Mary. I've got an assignment that I must get with immediately." Because there was no way that I could carry on this conversation with Mary McGrory. So I got rid of her and I closed the office door and buzzed Phyllis Maddock, now Nason, my long-time assistant. I said to her, "The President said he's naming me postmaster general." Well, she said, "When?" and I said, "I'm supposed to go to the Ranch, kind of kick it around."

G: But you assumed that it was a firm, tendered appointment?

O: Well, where, how, when, and under what circumstances? He had made a flat statement but in the same sentence had indicated clearly that this was a matter for us to discuss. So it left it a little bit of both. I then called Elva and said, "I just left the President and he wants you, me and Larry to come to the Ranch for the weekend." I told her we'd leave the next day.

G: Did you tell her about the discussion and the appointment?

O: I said, "He said something to me about naming me postmaster general, but he said, 'Come on down to the Ranch. We can talk about it.'" Well, Elva's comment was, "If I'm going to the Ranch, I'd better get my hair done."

(Laughter)

O: That was her reaction.

I went to Andrews the next day--I'm confused; I'm not sure Larry [went that time]. It might have been later when I was confirmed that he suggested Larry come down. I'm at Andrews and, lo and behold, there's John Gronouski and his wife, Dean Rusk and others, ready to go on the plane to the Ranch. I don't know whether Arthur Goldberg was on the plane or came down in another plane. In any event, we landed on the private strip. I don't say anything to Gronouski [or] Rusk, and nobody says anything to me. I was considerably at sea about this whole thing.

So, anyway, Lady Bird greeted us and made us feel at home, and everything is wonderful. Nothing more, as I recall, happened that afternoon or evening. John and his wife and Elva and I agreed that we'd go to mass together the next morning. There was a church somewhere near the Ranch and we'd go to mass. So the four of us went to mass and came back, went into the dining room and the President said, "Larry, why don't you and Elva come to church with me?" I said, "Mr. President, I have already been to church." "Oh, I know that." But "Come along, you ought to visit my little church." So we wound up in the motorcade to church. As we're arriving, Merriman Smith was among the press group standing there. The President said, "Look at Smith. Now, this is going to be interesting. Nobody knows you're here. When you get out of the car with me, I predict to you, you're going to hear Smith say, 'What's Larry O'Brien doing down here?'"

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(Laughter)

O: Sure enough, we get out of the car, I could hear him: "There's Larry O'Brien; what's he doing here?" We go into church. It came the time for the collection and I reached into my billfold, finding the smallest denomination I had was twenty dollars, so that went on the plate.

We came out of church; we're approaching noontime. I'm not riding with the President to the Ranch. I wind up in a car with Mrs. Johnson and Arthur Goldberg and somebody else. But [they were] in the back seat and I was sitting in the front. Mrs. Johnson said en route, "Larry, what is the subject of the press conference? What is the thrust of it, do you know?" I said, "I don't know. I have no idea." Arthur Goldberg said, "I would assume that the President is going to announce the Adlai Stevenson Scholarship Program." Something told me that Arthur wasn't right.

But, in any event, we got back to the Ranch. I've had no conversation with the President throughout. Everybody was to file out on the porch. He's going to have the press conference. Bill Moyers is telling where you sit, and Arthur Goldberg engages me in conversation. He said, "Larry, I want to tell you I feel strongly that you ought to go back to Massachusetts and run for the Senate." He was very well-meaning. He said, "I think it's a real opportunity. It would be great for you." He said, "I've got a lot of friends in Massachusetts. I can be helpful to you." I'm standing there, figuring something is going to hit me on the head in a few minutes and here's Arthur talking about the Senate contest in Massachusetts. I said, "Well, Arthur, I haven't given it any [consideration]." "Oh, I want you to think about it," he said. He was giving me a lecture on the subject. At which point Bill said, "Let's everybody get out there."

We go and sit and, of course, Hugh Sidey and all these old friends of mine are in the front row; they're wondering what's going on. There's Gronouski, there's Rusk, and there's Goldberg, and I don't know who else. The President, after some initial comments--the press conference on national television--praised John Gronouski and in the process announced that he was going to be ambassador to Poland, which of course I had not heard. Then he got to me and he did say, "It's known to all of you that Larry O'Brien and I have an agreement [for him] to stay a year as special assistant for congressional relations." Then he gave the old pep talk about how everything is going fine. "But now," he said, "I want Larry to join my cabinet and I'm naming him postmaster general."

The press conference is over in a few minutes. My immediate concern--it's strange how you react to something like this. We had had no conversations, the President and I. The conversation he had talked about in the Oval Office never occurred. My first concern was that Mrs. Johnson would think that I didn't respond candidly to her when she asked the question. I went over to her and said, "I want to tell you that when you asked, [I didn't know about this announcement]." She smiled and said, "I'm surprised, too, because Lyndon said he was going to discuss this with you." She also said, "I didn't know he was going to announce it at the press conference."



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My second concern was that I have a sister in Massachusetts and she might feel it was strange that her brother had never indicated this to her. I went in the house and got my sister on the telephone. Sure enough, she had watched the press conference. As I'm explaining to her, "Mary, I had no forewarning of this at all. I don't want you to think that I had some big secret that I didn't share with you," the President came by and he asked, "Who are you talking to?" I said, "My sister," and he said, "Give me the phone."  
(Laughter)

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O: He got on the phone, telling Mary what a fine brother she had and that ended that.

Then back to Washington. On *Air Force One* the President wants to chat with me. He was in high good humor. He was thoroughly enjoying this. He said to me, "It's all going to work out nicely. This is the way it should be." I didn't say to him, "By the way, what ever happened to the conversation that we were going to have?" He did say, "I was going to do this sooner, without any mention to you." And, lo and behold, he said, "Do you remember that morning when you and Rusk were talking? I had the press conference coming up? Well, I wondered what you were talking about because I had been talking to Rusk through the night and I had him busily clearing Gronouski, attempting to clear Gronouski with the Polish leaders." And he said, "Both leaders were unavailable. They were on vacation and he couldn't locate them. I had to drop what I had in mind, an announcement at the press conference because it would have been premature. I thought Rusk might have indicated to you what was going on." I said, "He never indicated anything to me about what was going on." He just chuckled away and enjoyed it thoroughly.

When we got back to Washington, I received a call from Mike Monroney and Mike Mansfield, and they scheduled a confirmation hearing. I'm back Sunday afternoon and I guess it was Monday morning I was talking to the two Mikes and Monroney said, "I'm going to schedule a confirmation hearing tomorrow morning." And he did. I went up there, and I forget now who was there; I guess [Leverett] Saltonstall was probably there, and I think Bobby Kennedy made an appearance. It was patty-cake except for one incident in the confirmation hearing. I'm groping now for the Senator's name, from Maryland.

G: Brewster?

O: Dan Brewster. Brewster asked me when it came his turn to question, "How do you feel about mail cover? What will your--?" Frankly, I didn't have the slightest idea what he was talking about. So I thought it would be satisfactory to say, "You can be sure I'll look into that as early as possible once I take over the position, if I do." That wasn't good enough. Brewster said, "Well, I can't understand why you can't have a position now," and he got

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mean about it. Nobody was picking any of this up on the committee; they were all looking quizzically at Brewster. He is at the end of the table. So he said, "I'd have to give second thoughts to whether or not I'd vote for confirmation if you can't give me a specific response at this time." And I said, "I regret that, Senator, but I'm not in a position to give you a specific response at this time." And that ended the hearing. Of course it concerned me because first I had to find out what mail cover was. (Laughter) But in any event Mansfield [and] Mike Monroney met with Ev Dirksen and they waived the procedures. I was confirmed unanimously at the opening of the session in the Senate that day.

For an extended period of time, I just went on with the legislative activities. The President made no reference to any swearing-in ceremony. As time went on, I made up my mind I wasn't going to bring the subject up. The President, meanwhile, had a physical setback; he had that [gall bladder] problem. He was at the Ranch for a considerable period of time. One day in a conversation--we had many conversations about the legislative program--he said, "Don't you think it's time that you were sworn in?" That may be the time then when he said, "Be sure to bring Larry."

But, anyway, my sister and brother-in-law, and my son and Elva and I went down and I didn't even have any idea what the procedure would be. I was taken aback when I was told, "Let's all get in the motorcade. We're going to this post office," which the President claimed was the post office where he mailed his first letter in this little general store in Hye, Texas. So down we go. The postmaster who ran the general store was one of several brothers, as I recall. The President made reference on the way that they had their own family baseball team, that he was on a baseball team that used to play against them. And that he had named him postmaster. When we got out of the car, there's a fellow standing on the steps and he introduced me. He said to him, "Tell him who made you postmaster." And the fellow said, "Jim Farley."

The President was considerably taken aback. On the way down in the car, he had talked about this cheese that would be in a barrel and he'd cut off a piece. It was the greatest in the world and he was looking forward to doing that. It was clear he felt that would be a good photo opportunity. Once this fellow had missed the target on who made him postmaster, we went by him into the general store with this little postal cage in the back of it. He asked where the cheese was. Well, there wasn't any barrel of cheese, so he wound up with processed cheese in cellophane, trying to go through with having a little cheese and crackers. Then on the steps of this general store we had the swearing-in ceremony.

Now I must go to the Post Office Department and I proceeded to do that and I discussed with the President my replacement. I stated the obvious, that I'd like to see him name Henry Hall Wilson special assistant for congressional relations. He thought very highly of Henry Hall, but he said that he wasn't going to make that move at least at that time. He'd prefer that I continue on.

G: Did he give a reason?

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O: He said you want to be sure that there was continuity in the legislative program and that I would retain the office and divide my time.

I went to the Post Office Department. My time became immediately almost exclusively postal in a sense but I did come over to the White House often, attended strategy meetings and all that, and it continued that way. Members of Congress were kind enough to have a reception for me, sort of a farewell and hello. Everybody assumed that I was divorced from the White House activities but I really wasn't. Joe Califano was on the phone with me regularly; I was over at the White House regularly. When I went to cabinet meetings, the only change that took place, instead of sitting alongside the wall and being called on to report on the legislative progress, I was called on as postmaster general to report on the legislative progress. And I proceeded to carry on that way for an extended period of time. I think it faded little by little as time went on. We got deeper into postal matters, particularly when I got into postal reorganization, but I don't recall that the time ever came where we actually designated a special assistant for congressional relations.

G: Why was Wilson the obvious choice to be recommended?

O: On my staff I considered him senior. He had assistance in dealing on the House side. Mike Manatos was pretty much on a solo, as far as my immediate staff was concerned, on the Senate side. Henry had been involved in a great deal more strategy because of our problems in the House over the years, which were greater than the Senate. Henry had done a very effective job of trying to cut back the southern Democratic opposition in the old southern Democrat-Republican coalition. We used to carefully monitor our roll calls and committee action to see if we were making progress in that area. And we were. We were reducing, little by little, this rigid southern Democratic opposition, picking up support here and there and this situation was improving. Well, adding all that up, if I were asked by the President, "Who on your staff would you recommend?" I clearly would have without hesitancy [recommended Wilson]. And that's no reflection on Mike Manatos, it was just that I considered Henry first among equals.

G: Do you think LBJ shared that view?

O: I think so. He thought very highly of Henry Hall, and rightly so. So that had nothing to do with that decision he made. It wasn't that he had any hesitancy about Henry Hall Wilson. If I had dropped dead that day, Henry Hall Wilson I have no doubt would have been named special assistant for congressional relations.

G: When you were down at the Ranch the first time, at the time of his press conference, after he designated you in public, then did he talk to you about being postmaster general and what he expected of you in that capacity?

O: I don't recall.

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G: Did he ever talk to you about that in terms of--?

O: No. The only time he ever talked to me about it was when, at some point, I wasn't readily available in some legislative discussion. He said and I'll never forget it, "Don't let that place bog you down." (Laughter) He said, "You get those limousines and all that staff and that's the way it should be, and you're a cabinet member. But if you find that it's taking up too much of your time, just name some more assistant postmasters general and let them do it."

(Laughter)

O: He didn't reflect on the fact that you don't name assistant postmasters general unless there's action to create the positions. But that was his attitude and that's why, other than the discussion that I had involving Charlie Schultze and the President, when I appealed my budget and got some satisfaction, we really didn't [discuss the Post Office Department]. I sent memos to him regularly as a cabinet member, giving him an update on the department, but I had to recognize that it was low on the totem pole in terms of priorities. You can keep making the statement that the postal service defrays 90 per cent of its cost and that these allocations of funding to close the gap are really less than 10 per cent of the cost of the postal service. That was what I am sure everybody expected, that I would just mouth the same and not be stirring anything up.

Of course that's why [I didn't tell the President] about this task force I had put together clandestinely in the Post Office to determine just, if you had your druthers, what steps would you take if you had total authority to impact on the service. That led to the creation of a blue-ribbon commission and throughout all of that, I don't recall I had any conversation with the President regarding the postal service of any substance. When I went public with the proposal to create the independent entity, I didn't have any discussion with the President. I was fearful that he might delay it because I felt he wouldn't focus on it. I wouldn't be able to get him to focus on something like this to the degree that would be necessary to get a presidential okay. Certainly, I felt it was in our best interest and it was. Nobody ever suggested otherwise.

So I didn't bother him; I went ahead and launched it. Then that brought it to a presidential blue-ribbon commission. When the commission filed its report, I was no longer postmaster general. They incorporated in the report about every element of the initial proposal, as I recall it. I was anxious that the President endorse it publicly, and he finally did endorse it briefly in his farewell address. That brought it to Nixon embracing it when he became president and moving on partisanly to bring it about at least in part, ultimately.

(Interruption)

G: What did your colleagues from the Kennedy Administration think of your appointment?

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O: Oh, as far as I know they were pleased with it and applauded it, certainly the Kennedys did. I guess one or both of them were at the hearing. Both were part of the record of the hearing, in any event. Teddy and Bobby were both enthused.

G: Did you talk to them privately?

O: Not privately--at the hearing with one of them and immediately afterwards with one of the others. I received phone calls from both of them on that Monday when I got back to Washington.

G: In your book, you indicated that had you gotten some attractive job offers in the summer of 1965 and you were thinking about what you would do, planning to decide what you would do that--

O: Yes. I was weighing that. I had to look ahead, it was only a matter of a year or less. There had been some contacts made with me; I don't even remember details of them. It was to be a matter of making a selection among two or three possibilities; also, I had on-going a book agreement. A contract was signed with **Look** magazine and Little, Brown. So that was in the works. I hadn't finalized anything that I can recall.

Mike Bessie was with Little, Brown at that time and I had extensive negotiations with both **Life** and **Look** magazines. Now, whether they were in that year or following that year, I don't quite recall. But they did result in a contract that once again I didn't fulfill and I returned the advance to Little, Brown. It was at a later time that I signed up with Doubleday and finally did the book.

(Interruption)

G: Well, were the job offers that you spoke of offers in Washington or would they have taken you back to Massachusetts?

O: I don't recall that anything would have taken me back to Massachusetts. It would have been Washington or New York, as I recall. Ultimately I wound up in New York in any event. But at the time of this action by Johnson, I'm sure that I was nowhere near reaching any conclusions about the upcoming year. I had envisioned that I would be there certainly through October and fulfill my commitment to the President.

G: You did write in your book that you wanted to return to private life during this period. Why was that?

O: I think there were a couple of reasons, perhaps. One, that I felt a considerable degree of fulfillment in terms of public activity. I felt a little worn-out. I had no serious thought of seeking public office, therefore there would be no reason to consider further public service. And the second aspect was that I obviously had made no provision for my future

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or my family's future. The time was inevitably going to come when I should face that responsibility, and that clearly would be in the private sector.

Once I had made the agreement with the President, I felt reasonably comfortable with it and had no regrets and had no feeling that I would face great disappointment on departure. The activities I [had] engaged in were personally rewarding and I had been lucky to have had the opportunity. But by the same token, I was never very good at long-range planning. That includes right up to this minute. Interestingly enough, it all seemed to work out one way or another as the years went on. I never did have a set of goals or a timetable of any kind. And I'm not too sure that wasn't the case even at that moment.

G: Political strategists had before served as postmaster general. Did you ever conceive of yourself in that role?

O: I think the closest I came to conceiving of myself in that role perhaps dated back to my much younger days when I was enamored with the role of Jim Farley with Franklin Roosevelt, but not on the PMG side, but as the [Democratic] national chairman. My political activity for the most part has been basically political organization, going back to the O'Brien manual. I guess if I had been asked if I could make a choice what would be my preference by way of continuing political activity, it would have been to be national chairman.

There was a degree of disappointment, although not of a serious nature at all, at the time of the Kennedy election, when it was decided that John Bailey would stay on as national chairman for some indefinite period. Conversations that Bobby and I had [were] to the effect that at some point I would probably become national chairman, but it was not a serious discussion and [in] no way [were there] any commitments nor did I dwell on it. Once I was in congressional relations, I was fulfilled in terms of challenge. And it probably was a more interesting and challenging job than national chairman.

Going back over positions I've held, the most satisfying position for me was special assistant to the president for congressional relations, despite postmaster general or national chairman or sports commissioner. That was the most meaningful time of my life. I had no awareness of that at the outset, because I had no real understanding of the job. But as it unfolded, it became more and more meaningful and I became totally involved.

G: More significant and fulfilling also than the political strategist role?

O: Yes. Thank goodness the President-elect at that time and I had no real understanding of the job. If he had or I had, we probably would have concluded that I didn't have the experience to take on a post of that nature.

(Interruption)

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G: In your book you mentioned a response to a question by LBJ when asked, "Who will replace O'Brien as head of congressional relations?" and he said, "O'Brien." Was that at the press conference at the Ranch?

O: It might have been. He made that clear to me when I proposed Henry Hall Wilson. And it might have even been stated in response to a question at the press conference, too. In fact, I think it was.

G: Was it difficult for you to maintain your job as head of congressional relations while assuming the post office position?

O: Yes, it was, and the reality of it was that as time went on I was less and less attentive to the congressional relations side. You had the staff; I made regular visits to the White House, I participated in major discussions regarding the program, and that was fulfilling Johnson's request that I continue. On a day-to-day basis, more and more I became involved in postal matters. Postal matters, of course, turned out to be, obviously, time-consuming. As we've mentioned earlier, I guess, we had postal crises. We had the Chicago crisis, which was mammoth, at the Christmas period. We got to that period while I had attention directed to postal reorganization. Once that was launched publicly, more and more you found yourself involved.

By then, I also had to do some traveling. But I tried to ensure that there was some political fallout from it. I went out as a post-master general around the country, but in local and area contacts and appearances, complementing the basic postal appearance, whether I was there dedicating a post office or attending a union convention or whatever, I had a degree of contact politically. I tried to keep my eyes and ears open and I would regularly report on those trips to the President. I would make a report regarding the department, but I would incorporate political observations.

But, as I say, obviously you were in no position to be eight or ten hours in the White House office in congressional relations and that wasn't happening. It concerned the President and his concern was expressed to Joe [Califano] and then to me directly, to Joe on many occasions and to me directly. But I did the best I could to fulfill the responsibility. Where I could be helpful in the legislative program, I could continue to be helpful. It was not fettered in that regard. I could go to the Hill; I could do whatever. But to be responsible for the day-to-day activities of the congressional relations office was too much to ask if I were going to reasonably fulfill my responsibilities at the department. So in reality Henry Hall Wilson was carrying that load pretty well without title. It went along that way and it worked out. So you stay alert to legislative problems and you try to have input in resolving those problems whenever you could and that was the way it went.

G: In your book you recounted a remark by Everett Dirksen at, I guess, a party that members of Congress and senators had for you, in which he asked you to save a little bit of bricks and mortar or something for a post office in Illinois.

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O: Yes. That was a unique party because it was put on by the press. It was a rarity for the press to dig into their pockets to put together a party. But they did and it was a fun party. It was just loaded with humor and kidding. Dirksen was called upon to make some comments. In his inimitable style, he complimented me on being postmaster general; he referred to our close friendship and then pointed out to me that he was sure I wouldn't be oblivious to or overlook some problems he might have in Illinois. He felt that I would certainly have in mind saving some bricks and mortar for him on occasion where it was in the public interest. It was a very humorous talk in which in summary he was saying, "Now, I expect to get a little patronage from you. We've been friends for a long time. Even though I'm in the other party, you're not going to pass me by. I'm sure you're going to remember me."

G: Did you?

O: I don't recall.

G: Well, did members of Congress and senators, now that you were postmaster general, expect or ask that they be given patronage considerations in return for advancing the legislation?

O: No. It followed the pattern that has been long established. You would get letters recommending rural mail carriers, postmasters, regional directors, but there wasn't any inordinate or usual pressure exerted. I remember that Strom Thurmond, who had changed parties, couldn't understand why he wasn't in a consultant position with regard to the Post Office Department despite the fact that he had changed parties. He took that up with me and we had a candid discussion in which I told him that my understanding was quite different than his. You have to take all those matters into consideration when you make a decision such as he made.

(Laughter)

O: That ended that. He took a swing at it.

G: What about post offices? Would a senator ever say, "Well, I will support the administration's bill if I get my post office in X town or city?"

O: I don't remember having great pressure exerted in that regard. Our problem with post offices really was the widespread understanding that we were very well behind in maintaining modern facilities and that in order to erect a post office, we had to work on a lease arrangement with some private contractor. We weren't able to build our own. There would be occasional letters or calls from members of Congress saying that, "So-and-so I understand is under consideration [for a post office lease]," or "He has a building that he's putting up that would be an ideal location for a post office in town X. I just want to tell you that he's got a good reputation." And I'd always respond or my people would respond by saying, "Well, you can be sure that he will be given full consideration along with



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everyone else." I don't recall any mean pressure or hardball pressure being exerted on me during those few years.

G: Let me ask you to describe your budgetary situation when you moved over to postmaster general.

O: Well, there was a natural tendency in the executive branch of government--that was historic, too--to take a hard look at the Post Office Department budget last. There was no real internal pressure or presidential interest, to the extent that the Post Office Department was treated the lowest in priorities. And that wasn't because of somebody being anti-Post Office Department; it was the nature of things. The fact is that the Post Office Department never could bridge that gap, always had a significant debt, and it had to be made up by way of congressional action in any event. That always brought about rate increases; it was sort of a revolving door.

While I was at the White House and dealing with the postmasters general, maybe it would be about some stamp that he'd like to see issued rather than the basic problems of the postal service. And when Ed Day was postmaster general in the early days of Kennedy, and John Gronouski was postmaster general, I can tell you, in terms of priorities at cabinet meetings, the postmaster general was almost nonexistent. That didn't change when I became postmaster general, because while I had a significant role at cabinet meetings, I had had a significant role since the beginning. I suppose if you were a fly on the wall, you'd say, "That's rather strange. They've gotten to the postmaster general and all he's talking about is legislation on the Hill. And he did throw a couple of sentences in about the Post Office Department."

So you didn't have a constituency that was particularly willing to listen to your problems or care much about them. It wasn't because they were anti, it was just a yawn. The Post Office Department had been there since the days of Benjamin Franklin and it'll be there tomorrow and it'll muddle along. Typical of congressional attitude, I remember Mel Laird calling me one day. He was going home to Wisconsin but he wanted me to know that he was going to give me a kind of belting around because he had gotten several letters from Wisconsin complaining about postal service. Mel and I had that kind of relationship. I said, "Mel, be my guest." But he said, "Well, I just want to tell you because you'll probably hear I am decrying the ineptness of the postal service." So I said, "That's all right. That's your end. I can't stop you from doing it. Be my guest; I understand."

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O: Even at the committee level, with members of the committee on the Post Office and Civil Service, it certainly wasn't the highest level of committee activity in the Congress.

It was pretty much nuts-and-bolts. You went up to testify to justify your appropriation and it got to "How's the zip code going?" or "How many post offices have you contracted for or leased in the last number of years, and how many employees?" Then

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when it came to dealing with those committees up there, frankly, the leaders of the postal unions had a lot more going for them than the postmaster general because they had the political power. There are seven hundred and some-odd thousand employees in those unions and they had grassroots strength, they were well organized and they were very well aware of the fact that, while you went through the charade of labor negotiations with the department, in the final analysis your pay raise would come from the Hill. You could make your demand up there and they'd capitulate.

All of this added up to just what do you do about it or what conceivably could I do about it. I would not have continued as postmaster general if a Democrat had been elected president.

So with that clearly in mind, I had this responsibility. I have a unique position because I have an entree to the President and a presence in the White House that's unique in terms of [a] cabinet member, and maybe I can make use of that. I have a relationship on the Hill that's been established over a period of years that's probably a little different than any other cabinet member. Can I make use of that? My first attempt to do that was to improve the budget with the President and then to ensure that it wasn't reduced or adversely impacted on the Hill. And I had total cooperation of the committees up there. That led me to saying, "Well, this is all well and good but it really isn't making any impact in terms of improving the postal situation." That led to what I have described before: the task force and blue ribbon commission and the ultimate proposal, to make it an independent entity with borrowing power and all the rest.

In the launching, while it wasn't embraced with great enthusiasm by our own administration and it was late in the game when the final proposals by way of a report were available, it was interesting to note that Mr. Nixon wasted no time embracing this and making it a bipartisan matter and having his postmaster-general designate meet with me in, of all places, the Democratic National Committee headquarters; a) to advise me that the President-elect was going to go forward vigorously in support of this proposal; [b]) that he, [Winton] Blount, had had this meeting with the President-elect and that [it] was clear the President-elect [supported it], and that he, Blount, would lead the charge as the new postmaster general and would I, because of my prior involvement and my obvious commitment, be willing to take on some activity in the interest of this proposal on a bipartisan basis. It had nothing to do with partisan politics. And I agreed to do that and co-chair the citizen's committee with Thruston Morton. We testified, and I should add that Bryce Harlow called me during that period and asked me if I would be willing to come to San Clemente and have a press conference with the President to further emphasize this.

I agreed to do it and a plane was provided for me and I went out to San Clemente. And I must say, it was a little bit strange. But I had coffee with the President and we had a long chat that was confined solely to the postal service.

G: Really? Didn't talk politics?

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O: Other than he had made a public appearance that involved some kind of controversy somewhere the previous night. He had spoken somewhere, I forget where, and I made reference to that and asked him what his reaction was to it.

Then we were joined by Morton and Blount. Then the President escorted me down the hall to the press conference room where I faced a lot of my old friends who thought this was really fun; they were getting a big chuckle out of it. There was some reference made as we stood to make our statements as to where I would stand, to the right of Nixon but not far to the right, or Nixon to the right of me at the podium. We went through this and it was confined solely to advocacy of reorganization. Then the President said that he was going to leave the press conference. He said it was obvious from some of the questions they probably would want to talk to me further. That was the signal for Blount and Morton to leave and I found myself alone at the press conference for a few minutes and there were some questions in the [area of] politics which were really just fun and games for a few minutes. That was the press conference and I left San Clemente. But I did have that brief association--

G: Just questions about politics rather than about--

O: The postal reorganization? Yes. (Laughter) There again, to arouse the press generally about the postal service has always been a major problem. They listened dutifully and had no interest or at least it wasn't expressed in any Q and A. But I thought it was interesting that Nixon decided to leave the podium to me.

Anyway, Morton and I made various appearances at various times and this effort went on for a long period. It was an organized effort and it was funded by mail-users who were persuaded that this was the right way to go, all of them sharing a common concern about postal service, obviously. Then ultimately, it came to the finalization of reorganization in the form it took, by which time I was not directly engaged nor have I been since.

G: Did you have a different relationship with Lyndon Johnson as a cabinet officer?

O: No, I don't think so. I think that I wasn't immediately at hand as I was in the White House where you could have a number of contacts during the day.

G: You didn't spend as much time around him, in his presence?

O: Yes.

G: I see.

O: But as far as [that goes], I don't think Lyndon Johnson and I ever had a meaningful conversation about the Post Office Department. (Laughter)

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G: Did he treat you any differently as a cabinet officer?

O: No. No. His treatment of me from day one was extremely pleasant and I never had--I shouldn't say never because there was an incident probably in 1968 that we'll get to when he was determining whether he would run for president again or not where--and I'll have to recall it by the time we get there. But there was a slight incident for a brief, fleeting minute.

But the fact is, and this isn't gilding the lily, that there will be a fair appraisal of the Johnson presidency at some point that will be devoid of some of the meanness and recriminations which have existed in the early years following his presidency. I feel strongly about it because of the personal relationship I had with him and the personal relationship my wife and I had with both the Johnsons. It couldn't have been more pleasant. They reached out to us, which was very pleasant. Therefore, my experience with him was, as I said earlier, very rewarding.

G: You saw him on and off during that fall of 1965. Did the gall-bladder surgery affect his conduct as president or his operation in the office?

O: No, that was, as I recall it, a quick decision, a quick move into the hospital for the gall bladder surgery. In fact if I recall, it interrupted activity we were scheduled to be engaged in that very evening.

G: The Salute to Congress?

O: Yes. I had contact with him during his period of recuperation. It was limited, obviously, to telephone conversations which were exclusively on the progress of the legislative program. So I didn't have any opportunity to directly or personally observe. All I can say is that nothing changed as far as the White House and its operation were concerned. There was never any indication that the Vice President was taking over some role in the conduct of government. The reins were held firmly by Lyndon Johnson throughout.

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview XIV

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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

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

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