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ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

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Interviewer T. H. Baker

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Discusses his relationship with President Johnson, observation of the South Viet Nam elections, and the Civil Rights Commission.

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INTERVIEWEE: EUGENE PATTERSON

INTERVIEWER: T.H. BAKER

March 11, 1969

B: This is the interview with Eugene Patterson. Sir, let me summarize your career here, subject to additions and corrections. Born in Valdesta, Georgia in 1923; B.A. from the University of Georgia; army service in World War II; started out in the newspaper business as a reporter for the Temple paper and Macon paper; '48 to '56 with the United Press in South Carolina and New York and London; then in '56 joined the Atlanta Journal and Constitution, first as Vice President and executive editor and then from '60 to '68 as editor of the Constitution. And in those years you won the Pulitzer for editorial writing and you are now with the Washington Post, is that correct?

P: Now I'm the managing editor of the Washington Post, yes. I came her in 1968.

H: I see, the very last part of '68.

P: That's right. From Atlanta. I resigned the editorship of the Constitution to take this job in Washington.

H: During this career, sir, when did you first have any acquaintance with Mr. Johnson?

P: Oh, I had seen Mr. Johnson at various places when he was in the United States Senate. I'd seen him at the 1960 Democratic Convention, for instance, when he had sought the nomination that John F. Kennedy ultimately won. But he was only a public figure to me then. I didn't meet him personally until April of 1964 when he was already President.

B: Back before that, were you working on the Temple, Texas Telegram?

P: Excuse me for just a moment. (interruption)

B: I was asking you if your service on the Temple, Texas, Telegram included the time of the '48 Senatorial election in Texas?

P: No, no. I left Texas after only a brief stay on the Telegram to go back to Georgia and work in Macon.

B: As a Southern newspaper editor, had you formed any opinion of Mr. Johnson before 1960?

P: Yes, I'd come to admire him greatly during the Eisenhower years when he was instrumental as Senate Majority Leader in passing the first civil rights act that established the Civil Rights Commission, for instance, 1957. I thought it took a great deal of courage for a Southern politician to turn and help an opposition President to pass that bill.

B: Did you so characterize him in your newspaper?

P: Well, yes. At that time we did praise Senator Johnson.

B: Were you a working newspaperman at the '60 Convention?

P: I was, yes. I was editor of the Constitution at that time, but I was doing reporting and columns.

B: Can you shed any light on the circumstances of Mr. Johnson's being offered and accepting the vice presidenial nomination?

P: No, I can't really shed any light. I do recall a couple of personal notes. It surprised me. I had rather sympathized with Johnson in a curious way. I felt a kinship with him because he and I were both Southerners trying to change from our past and become modern Americans--and certainly with respect to race relations. I knew the agonies that any Southern politician would have to go through to do that and

I admired him greatly for trying--trying to lead his region. Many people considered him conservative and backward by national standards. I considered him a very bold and audacious Southern politician.

So I went to Los Angeles sympathetic to his candidacy. But, of course, he had no chance of winning. I talked to Sam Rayburn in his hotel suite at the Biltmore in Los Angeles a couple of days before the actual nomination. Though he said nothing overt, it was quite clear that he had little hope that the President would win. He was amiable and appeared comfortable with the situation. He knew the facts of political life.

Now, so far as the day that Mr. Kennedy surprised the country by turning to Johnson as his Vice Presidential choice, I can only tell you this. I was sitting across the street from the Biltmore in a small hotel where the Georgia delegation was quartered having a cup of coffee with Robert Russell, who later became a judge. He was the nephew of Senator Richard B. Russell, a close friend of Senator Johnson. And Senator Johnson also was a close friend of Robert Russell; he was young, but he was a Russell of Georgia. He had gained the President's ear. He ultimately became a judge in Georgia and died of cancer at an early age. Mr. Johnson, who was President then, went to the funeral in Georgia, of this young man. But he and I were sitting, having a cup of coffee. He was influential in the Georgia delegation. I was seeking any insights he had and he got a telephone call. So he excused himself; went to the phone and came back trotting and highly agitated. I asked him what was wrong. He said, "You're not going to believe this but Senator Russell just called me from Washington and he said that Senator Johnson is about

to take the Vice Presidential nomination and asked me to get right over there and urge him not to do it--that it is foolish." And so with that, he rushed out the front door, across the street to the Biltmore, presumably on a mission of Senator Russell urging Senator Johnson not to accept the Vice Presidential nomination.

B: Did the nephew say anything about his uncle's reasoning?

P: He did not. He did not. But I'm sure that--well, I would hate to speculate on Senator Russell's reasoning. He, you know, was a very close friend of Johnson and obviously thought that Johnson was embarked on a path of folly by accepting that nomination. I'm sure that if you ask Senator Russell today he would agree that Johnson showed a good deal of shrewdness to have accepted it. But who could have foreseen the assassination of Kennedy?

B: True. While we're at this stage, just for the record, you consider yourself a Democrat?

P: Oh, I don't like to characterize myself as anything but an independent. As a newspaperman I don't like to take sides. But, yes, most often as an editor in the days of the Constitution when I was writing editorals my philosophy fell into the general Southern progressive Democratic mold.

B: The answer to this one will probably be obvious to anyone, but I want to put it in here just for the record, too. Have you ever been actively engaged in political campaigning?

P: Never have.

B: Did you see anything of Mr. Johnson or Mrs. Johnson in the campaign in 1960? Did they campaign in Georgia?

P: Yes, they came through Georgia. As you'll recall, Mrs. Johnson made

a train tour through Georgia campaigning for the Kennedy-Johnson ticket, and Mrs. Herman Talmadge, I believe, rode the train with her for a couple of stops. Mrs. Johnson was greeted rather cordially. Then when Mr. Johnson came through it was late in the campaign, and he came through Atlanta late at night. I went down to the terminal station there, the railroad station. He came out on the rear of his train and made a speech to a small group of people assembled late at night around the rear of the train. His speech was just a typical Johnson speech of that time, delivered rather gracelessly with vast, vast arm motions and a bawling tone of voice. He said very little--a bunch of catch-phrases about what the South owed the Democratic Party--and was cheered.

B: There wasn't a great deal of love in Georgia for the Democratic Party in those days.

P: Well, that was before the defection from the Party became general in the South. The old Democratic mystique still held good in 1960, you'll remember. And Kennedy swept the state of Georgia by a large margin. In contrast to that, Goldwater carried it in '64 and Wallace in '68.

B: Let me ask you another thing in here. This is not, maybe, directly relevant to you but, tragically enough, we had Ralph McGill on this interview list. Did you see anything of the relationship between Mr. Johnson and Mr. McGill at any time in these years?

P: Yes, Mr. McGill was--he and I worked in tandem on the Constitution and we shared pretty much the same philosophy. He shared my view that Lyndon Johnson was a remarkable man who deserved support in the South because he stood for those progressive attitudes, especially

with respect to civil rights, that McGill and I attempted to stand for.

B: Was it a close relationship in the sense McGill served as a kind of advisor? Did Johnson ever contact him and ask for advice?

P: Oh, occasionally, very infrequently, Johnson did call him. He called me on occasion. But usually, it was not a matter of great importance. It was simply a consultation.

B: What kind of thing would he call you on? I assume you mean these are the years before you got on the Civil Rights Commission?

P: No, no, this was after I was on the Commission. The last time I recall was the Saturday before Martin Luther King, Jr., was buried in Atlanta on a Monday. There was speculation in the press and on the wire services that the President was going to that funeral. He called me when I was fishing at Callaway Gardens in Georgia and I took the call from the President of the United States, oddly enough, on a little public phone hung on a pine tree outside the fishing camp where I was staying. He just simply asked me if I would--he told me that chances were he was not coming to the funeral because the Secret Service had argued against it. He said it was going to be embarrassing to him and the King family if the press speculation over the weekend continued to say he was coming. He said he would appreciate it if I would pass the word a little in Atlanta that chances were that he was not coming, in an effort to keep the record straight. So I called the wire services and told them that I had information that the President was not coming--you know, just a small thing of that type.

But when he would call like this, he would chat. He liked to talk and when he felt he was talking to a friend he roved over Viet Nam

where Bill Baggs, the late editor of the Miami News, and Harry Ashmore of the Center of Democratic Institutions had just been on a trip up to Hanoi which he didn't much approve of. Charles Collingwood was also there. This was when--April, 1968? The President characterized Mr. Baggs to me as stupid and suggested that Collingwood was creating confusion by coming out and saying the North Vietnamese wanted to hold peace talks in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The President rambled on with me, saying it was silly to talk about that because we didn't even have a legation or an embassy in Phnom Penh--and no communications. How could you possibly hold peace talks there? He rambled on in this fashion.

B: Did this kind of conversation require any answer from you or just require you to be a willing listener?

P: No, just a listener. He undertook--you know, if he thought you were a friend--to fill you in on his troubles.

B: Later on, into the sixties, when the civil rights turmoil began, did he ever talk to you privately in the same sense about that? Or just get information from you about what was going on.

P: No, not really. After I went on the Civil Rights Commission--. Well you might be interested in how I happened to be chosen by the President.

B: That was the next question in line, so why don't you go ahead there.

P: I had gone to the home here in Georgetown, in Washington, in April, 1964 to a dinner where several editors from around the country were present. Norman Issacs of the Louisville Courier-Journal and several others whose names I don't recall offhand. But we'd simply been invited to Max Freedman's house. Freedman was writing a column then,

the former Manchester Guardian correspondent and a friend of President Johnson's--and it was a nice Georgetown dinner party.

At the close of it, in came Senator Hubert Humphrey and this was sprung on us as a surprise so Senator Humphrey was seated at the table. Then to everyone's real surprise in walked the President, Mr. Johnson. He'd been president then how long--four or five months. So he sat down at the head of the table and started out on one of those long evening talks that he enjoyed so much. I suppose there were a dozen people there, editors and their wives around this flower-banked dinner table. I believe it was candlelit. Here sat the President, answering questions and talking nonstop. The talk went on well past midnight. So when I first spoke up to ask him a question about then current topics, I identified myself as being Gene Patterson of the Atlanta Constitution, and he interrupted me and leaned across the table with those black eyes magnified by thick glasses, looked at me and said, "I know who you are." And with this dramatic flair he so much enjoyed using--it could be called arm-twisting, I suppose, when you're caught among your peers like this. He said, "I know who you are and I'm asking you right here and now to serve on my Civil Rights Commission. Will you accept the appointment?"

Well, that had me pretty well hot-boxed, you see. And everyone around the table clapped and looked at me. What immediately went through my mind was the possible conflict as a newspaper editor taking a quasi-government appointment. It's an unsalaried job and we met once a month. It was not a government job in any sense. Measured against what I was trying to achieve in the South, I felt this might possibly help me to gain the national background I

needed to address my problems in Atlanta. So I told him, yes I would accept the appointment. Jack Valenti, his assistant, was prowling around the dining room taking notes on everything that was said. So he wrote that down.

So the President went on with his talk and the next morning, before I even got up, he had called in the press at the White House and announced my appointment. So it moved very fast. I was on the Civil Rights Commission. He made me Vice Chairman replacing Dean Robert Storey of Southern Methodist University.

But that same evening, my wife, Sue, was with me, and as the party broke up, after dinner, we were all getting our coats and preparing to leave and there was milling around the front door. All of a sudden this tall figure tapped me on the shoulder and said, "You want a ride?" I looked up and it was the President of the United States offering me and my wife a ride home to our hotel, the Statler-Hilton, here in Washington. We didn't have a car. We were going to call a cab so we said, "Sure, we'd like to ride." So we walked down the steps of the gravel driveway and we climbed into this long black limousine. Rufus Youngblood, the Secret Service agent, was in the front seat. The President sat on the right rear. My wife in the center of the back seat and I on the left. As we drove through Washington--it must have been two a.m.--I mentioned to Mr. Johnson that it worried me to see the President of the United States staying up so late when he needed rest. I knew he was an early riser. And he was quite weary. He was leaning over with his head in his hands, just riding along, pensively, and he said, "Well," he said, "Well, I enjoy this. This is my relaxation. To get away

from that White House and just sit down among friends and talk is my relaxation. I need this more than I need the sleep."

So our conversation went on; he was talking about the press and how he saw in the years ahead serious troubles between himself and the press and that he wanted to do everything he could to meet editors and to let them meet him and to talk to them. But he went on and made the curious comment that he was not deluding himself that the press would never come to like him. He felt obviously quite bitter toward the press. He felt that his southernism was such a bar to the Eastern press that they could never get across this chasm that separated them. I interrupted him to say, "Mr. President, I think the press is a good deal fairer than you indicate and I think they will judge you on your performance; not on your accent or your background." And I said, "I think it's a mistake for you to start out with this attitude toward the press because I know these men. And I think they are going to be fair to you, based on your performance."

And he raised his head out of his hands and looked at me, not angrily but somberly and he said, "Well, I don't think that's the case. You watch the New York Times. Whenever they take an editorial position, you'll see that same editorial position rolling across the country. Within two weeks, papers all over the country will be writing the same thing they do. And the New York Times doesn't like me."

And I said, "Well, I've read the Times regularly since you have been President. It seems to me they have been fair." I said, "You handled the Panama Crisis. You handled the Guantanamo Crisis quite

well, and they said so." I said, "Don't you think it'll be your performance that's under scrutiny and not Lyndon Johnson?"

And he said, "Sure, as long as I do all right." "But," he said, "You wait until I make one mistake."

I think he read the press pretty well.

B: Yes, I was going to say, because that conversation was taking place in the honeymoon period.

P: April of 1964.

B: And it was really a fairly accurate prediction, I guess.

P: He was predicting in the most emphatic terms that he felt that the press would never give him a fair deal. I have thought many times through the years since, of that conversation, because I think the press--especially the more intellectual element--especially that group that formed what came to be called the Kennedy cult, during the Johnson years--I think that it, from the very outset, was unkind and needlessly cutting toward him. But I also think, remembering that conversation, that it marked a weakness in Mr. Johnson. I think he was defeated before he began his attempt to relate to the press, because he came to it with enmity and suspicion and, I think, a deep insecurity.

B: Do you think he really understands the function of journalism, as journalist understand it?

P: No. He constantly felt that he was standing for the good of the country. I think he felt the press was being unfair to him throughout. And his public statements since he left the Presidency have indicated this. But this fact is April of 1964, he predicted what the press would do to him--and it did it.

B: Did you ever later on, have occasion to talk to him about his relations with the press?

P: No, I don't think so. I did not. I was not really close to this President. I simply knew him. He invited my wife and me to the White House to a couple of dinners and always recognized us. Lady Bird was always extremely cordial--wonderful woman. And the President was nothing but kind to us. I remember when I won the Pulitzer Prize, his was one of the first telegrams I received of congratulation. When the 1967 elections were held, in September of '67 in South Viet Nam, he asked Ralph McGill to serve on his delegation of important Americans who went out as observers. McGill was in the hospital at Emory University in Atlanta at that time for treatment of the heart fibrillation which later led to the complication that killed him. He was not in physical shape to accept. And so, I was asked in his place. I did accept this mission on condition that another newspaper editor who did not support the war in Viet Nam be named, because I was supporting it at that time. So they asked John S. Knight of the Knight newspapers and he accepted. So we had a hawk and a dove representing American journalism which I felt I owed myself and my professional standing.

On our return from Viet Nam, we were taken to the White House directly from the airport to brief the President. Here again, I think, was an indicator of how little the President understood the press. Here were these people who had been for ten days out in the Far East, and he said he wanted them to come to the Cabinet Room and brief him on what they'd seen. Well, I'd made some rather frank notes on the back of an envelope because I was going to tell it as it was--what

I had seen--and these included some worries of mine. I was going to tell him that I'd seen 9th Division armored personnel carriers running across farmer's rice paddies south of Saigon; that I didn't see why the Army was in that mudhole of a place anyway, and I heard that there was going to be an increase of strength in the Delta, and I thought it was a mistake--and these various impressions that I had gathered. I was going to tell him. But instead of creating an atmosphere where we could talk frankly, he called in a pool of reporters into the Cabinet Room, and it was more or less a love feast he staged, which I found personally demeaning. That is to say, he called on his friends, like Governor Hughes of New Jersey or Archbishop Lucey of San Antonio--men who were predictably going to praise the effort in Viet Nam and find no criticism. So he went around the table calling on each man. It was a performance, not a report. And it was in such a situation that had you raised a criticism, you would have been guilty of letting the side down. You would have been insulting the President who sent you. So he was cutting himself off from what could have been some valuable reports. Senator Ed. Muskie was there, Jack Knight and I. We all had some things we could have told him. But it was not the forum for it. He completely cut himself off.

B: Did you ever have a chance to tell him?

P: No. And the press, of course, being in the room, these fellows had everything but a curled lip to see this delegation going through its puppet show at the President's behest. I don't think he quite understood how undignified this was for the delegation. When he came to me--well, when he came to Knight, Knight was a rather crusty

fellow, he said, "Mr. President, I have some observations, but I'd rather give them to you in private." And the President said, "Well, fine. We'll meet sometime." I don't know if they ever did. Then he came to me and I gave I guess, the only unhappy note in this otherwise harmonious proceeding when I said--because all the other fellows had been saying to him, "Oh, it was a great election; it was a masterly show of democracy in action; I don't know how they did it in the midst of a war, balloting." And each told little anecdotes glorifying the election.

Then when he came to me I mentioned to him that "Mr. President, I feel that we have to put this thing in its context." I said, "I believe any comment on the election has to be measured against the background that some men were not permitted to run by the South Vietnamese--Au Truong Thanh, Duong, Van Minh, had been barred from running--popular candidates." And I said, "Now, against that background, I can say that I think it was a fair exercise and rather a valuable one." But at the moment I mentioned these unhappy tidings--he had been taking notes with pencil and he looked up at each person as he spoke, you know, and looked steadily at him and nodded and listened to the encouraging talk. But when I put the sour note into it, he looked quickly from his pad and glared at me with obvious anger as if I were doing an unfair thing. Then he put his head back down, wrote studiedly with his pencil without looking at me again. So, he did not take kindly to being told things he didn't want to hear.

B: Did that kind of anger last? You mentioned you and your wife got invited to the White House?

P: No, it didn't last, didn't last. Later he took this delegation into

lunch, and made a long talk after lunch. Later I went by to shake his hand and he grabbed my hand and--typical politician--hung on to it while he looked for something--sort of leading me around--that great ham hand grabbing mine--fished out a little plaque of himself imbedded on a small wooden base with a somewhat corny sentiment on it "To E.P. for his vigilance in Viet Nam. LBJ." engraved on the base. Of course, it was just a medallion bearing the President's likeness. He meant well with these things, and his anger didn't last. He was quite cordial at lunch. But, I think, he did consider me to have let the side down a bit by not joining the unanimous praise for the election.

B: Were you allowed in Viet Nam to observe freely?

P: Yes. Yes. Governor Tom McCall of Oregon, who was also with the delegation, and I, after the first day, simply commandeered aircraft and went where we chose to go without advance notice. We got away from any State Department travel schedule. We dropped in on district capitals and talked to province chiefs without them knowing we were coming. So I think we got a pretty fair look at it.

B: In regard to the Civil Rights Commission, most of its work has been pretty thoroughly documented, but to get some general and subjective questions--Has it been in your opinion, an effective group?

P: Oh, it's been effective in a limited way. The whole proposition of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission was--it began as a stop-gap measure. It moved increasingly, I think, into isolation under Kennedy and then Johnson. There was a built-in antagonism between the Justice Department and the Civil Rights Commission because they tracked over each other. And under strong Attorneys General like Robert Kennedy, and later Nicholas Katzenbach, the relations

between the Commissions's staff director and the Commission itself and the Attorney General, were always rather frigid. They did not want us getting into areas that they were investigating.

But, by its very nature, you see, the Commission was a fact-finding group. It kicked shins within the federal establishment. We could as soon investigate the Justice Department or the Agriculture Department or the Pentagon--and did--as well as go down and investigate wrongs in Mississ ppi. So this did not make it a very popular agency in Washington. It was a gumshoe, a fact-finder, and rather emphatic in its findings. Because it had no constituency, it could be independent.

B: Did your relations with the Justice Department change after Mr. Clark became Attorney General?

P: Yes. After Ramsey Clark came in as Attorney General there was a very cordial relationship that developed.

B: Did you work out some kind of modus vivendi for where you would operate and where Justice would operate?

P: No, I think Clark simply realized that we were all going in the same direction. But Robert Kennedy was quite uncooperative when President Kennedy was in. Of course, I was not on the Commission then, but when I came to the Commission and Robert Kennedy remained for a while as Johnson's Attorney General, there was a very bad feeling between Justice and the Commission. Attorney General Kennedy had--in the view of some of the commissioners--like Dr. John Hannah and Father Theodore Hesburgh, had been openly insulting to the commissioners in a face to-face encounter. And so there was no love lost.

B: Did Johnson ever have anything to do directly with the Commission?

P: Very little. There came to be a dispirited feeling there on the commission, because President Johnson seldom seemed to seek the counsel of it. And during the entire time I served on the Commission, he saw us, I believe, once. We went to the White House with a massive study we had done on racial isolation in the schools. He received us in the Cabinet Room, was quite cordial, listened, questioned each of us about the report. But it was pretty much a pro forma meeting. He had other things to do and this was a minor agency in Washington. With his vast distractions, I'm sure, he considered it something he didn't have time for.

B: Was there any debate or dissension within the Commission among the Commissioners or between the Commissioners and the staff over what to do, where to go?

P: Oh yes. I think you've got to have friction to make any organization run. The lineup of the Commission was that you had three Republicans and three Democratic types. Three Northerners and three Southerners. Well, when I came on one of the Southerners was Mrs. Frankie Freeman, the distinguished Negro lawyer from St. Louis. I suppose most of my tangles since I was, I suppose, the most conservative member of that Commission--my tangles were with her but they were, again, pro forma. I was expected to be the nay-sayer, the man who questioned any radical move. And she was expected, being black, I think, by her people to fight me. So out of these frictions, we did have some good arguments, but we also wrote better reports than we would have if we'd just done unquestioned things that the staff handed to us.

There were constant frictions between staff and Commission. I suppose you could characterize them, the staff, as young, gung-ho

lawyers who wanted to solve the civil rights problem fast. Those of us who had lived longer and who had more experience realized you had to carry the people with you in a democracy. And so you have the tug of war as to how fast, how far.

B: Did your reports really have any effect? For example, just pick on at random, there was the '65 report on discrimination in agriculture programs. Did anything really get done?

P: It certainly did. Secretary of Agriculture Freeman went to work on that one and many changes were made in the South with respect to desegregation of 4H Club programs, the election of Negroes to ASCS committees, the allotment of acreages in cotton and crops of this type. Once we blew the whistle, I think, the fact that this report had gone to the President activated the Secretary and he made some large changes.

B: Did it have similar effects in other areas?

P: Yes, I think so. I think our voting studies in Mississippi in 1965 were key facts on which the Voting Rights Act of that year was later based. As you'll recall, before I was on the Commission, when the Commission recommended that federal funds be withheld from schools that refused to comply with desegregation decisions, President Kennedy publicly repudiated the Civil Rights Commission in a press conference saying that no President had the power to do this and he wouldn't want the President to have the power. Well, within two years, Congress had given him the power and funds were being cut off. The Commission saw itself as a cutting edge to go out and say the unsayable, to try to see the thing whole, make recommendations that may not have been politically feasible at the time they were made

but did meet the problem we felt.

B: Did the Commission play a part directly or indirectly in other legislation like the '68 Civil Rights Bill?

P: Yes, I think the whole body of its work contributed to all of the Civil Rights Acts that have been passed. I mentioned voting because we had more hard facts and statistics gathered on that than anything else but--the Public Accommodations Act, the Civil Rights Act of '64, for instance, I think--we had done some groundwork that gave Congressmen and judges as well, Judiciary as well as the Legislative Branch, the background on which to make comments. Judge John Minor Wisdom of New Orleans, other federal judges--if you'll search their opinions in these landmark cases, you'll frequently find them quoting Civil Rights Commission findings.

B: Did the Civil Rights Commission work with the Kerner Commission on its report on civil disorders?

P: No, we did not.

B: Did anyone on the Commission? Do you think perhaps they should have?

P: Not really, the Kerner Commission, I believe, did call on us for some statistical background material of this type. But it was, after all, a Presidential Commission set up for its own purpose and with its own staff.

B: Is it correct to say that most of the Civil Rights Commission work was concentrated on the South?

P: Yes. To perhaps too large an extent in that period it did.

B: Well, I was going to ask--

P: I argued against this on the Commission constantly.

B: That was my question. Did anyone ever see the coming troubles in the

Northern cities and how far did you get when you argued?

P: Pretty far. We finally held some hearings in Cleveland, Rochester, Syracuse, Oakland, San Francisco. Frankly what we found, I believe, in Cleveland, was worse than anything we had seen in the South. This was, I suppose, '66. It was before the great blowup of Hough slum and the riots in Cleveland. We saw a city in trouble and wrote a very strong report on it. It was our changeover to a recognition of urban problems in civil rights. So by the time I left the Commission--and I resigned in '68 in order to come to the Washington Post. This is too sensitive a paper in Washington politics for any staff member to have any relationship to any government agency. I recognize this and resigned. But before I did we had swung over, we had recognized that the great future problem lay in the urban areas in the North, because that's where the urban areas lay--schools and all the rest of it. So we were doing our deep studies in those areas.

B: bout that same time, the Justice Department was beginning to sort of reorient itself toward the North, too, wasn't it?

P: Yes, yes it was. We did one hearing, the Commission did, in Alabama in '68. But it was peripheral. I felt it accomplished very little. And during this period, too, we were attempting to get the staff interested and get moving in the direction of the Spanish surname Americans. The staff had been oriented very largely toward Negro problems. We had looked into some Mexican-American problems in the San Francisco Bay area in that hearing. But we had not done an adequate job I felt. We were planning a meeting in Texas at the time when I left the Commission. It was later held in San Antonio.

B: We're close to the time that you've got to go to that meeting, can you

sort of sum it up with an evaluation of Mr. Johnson, his strengths and weaknesses from your point of view?

P: Well, I think Lyndon Johnson was quite possibly a great President. I feel that his legislative knowledge led to breakthrough legislation in civil rights--other fields--social welfare that will long mark this Republic. Many of his programs are now condemned. His antipoverty programs, the OEO, and all the rest of it are considered to be failures by the Moynihans who assess them. I don't think so. I think they led this country in the 1960's into a knowledge of its frailties and needs and problems. Although it may not have found the solutions to them, it led it to a recognition of itself, much as the Depression and Roosevelt's leadership led the nation into some notion of democratic needs in the 1930's. By that I mean a responsive government, a government that is intimately concerned with problems that are beyond the private sector's capacity to cope with.

In that sense, I think that the Johnson years are going to be increasingly important in history because in a period of affluence, following the sleepy fifties under Eisenhower and early sixties under Kennedy where great dreams were dreamed but little action came of them, I think Johnson of Texas brought the pragmatic legislative skills that he possessed into important place. And whether his poverty programs worked or not, he forced this nation to face the fact of poverty in the midst of wealth. It can never forget that now. However we solve the problem--whether it's Nixon's black capitalism or whatever--Johnson led us to a recognition of our needs. He led us to realize that poverty is an obligation of the comfortable to cope with. And this

I think is terribly important to this nation because we can get fat and happy and self-satisfied and forget the neighbor who isn't doing so well. Johnson never permitted us to do it. He kept our noses right in it. So I give him very high marks for that.

On Viet Nam, I think history's going to be a little kinder to him than we have been in contemporary time, too. I hope I'm not simply trying to justify my own support for that war. It's highly unpopular and at this moment in 1969 is, of course, a matter for negotiation and disengagement. But I think the President went into that war with the same feeling that I had, and that was not a arrogance of power as Senator Fulbright called it, but as a genuine belief that a wealthy nation owes some debt to the world's unfortunate; that our affluence is selfishness unless we share it; that, sure the old-line business about aggression if it's not checked it will spread--the Domino Theory if you will. I think all of these may be seen to be a little more valid as time goes on and tempers cool and they are now.

I think he had a great failure in Viet Nam. I think the military has egg on its face. They say, "Oh, if we could have bombed Haiphong or if we could have gone into Cambodia." But that isn't the point. A President of the United States handed the military establishment a mission with perimeters and boundaries and said, "Now, within this, do this job." And they failed. The Air Force failed. General Westmoreland failed. Within the given situation they were unable to perform the mission the President gave them. I don't much cotton to argument saying, "But he tied their hands." He gave them a mission; they didn't perform it.

I think that the State Department--I'm an admirer of Secretary Rusk and his determination--but somewhere in the policy planning section of that State Department, somebody didn't do his job. And that was, how do you bring to bear these American resources and this American ideal to help those people? How do you do it politically and economically while you shield them militarily? We had a complete national failure, diplomatic and military in performing the mission that the President handed his government and his people to perform.

I think anything else is peripheral to that. I think that he was vastly misrepresented as a bomb-happy, crude, war-loving Texan, when I think this man wanted peace, wanted to help a poorer people, and wanted to frame some future for Asia that would give it the same security that Europe has as a result of American actions. The failures are obvious. The North Vietnamese were tougher than he thought they were. Our own system failed to produce a policy and a plan that could be effective. So you must fault the President. He was the boss. He took us in, he couldn't get us out.

B: Misrepresentation you mentioned, is that a criticism of the press?

P: To some extent, yes. I thought the press got rather shrill at times on Viet Nam. But I'm always happy to see friction in the American press. If we ever get to saying one thing--which I'm sure President Johnson would have enjoyed everyone saying that Johnson is a great President and the war is a holy crusade. He would have loved that probably. But it would have been an unhealthy country if it had. Much as I disagreed with some of the writing during these years, I'm delighted that we are in a free country where a man can have an opinion and even an angry opinion, because out of this we might gain

some wisdom.

B: Is there anything else you think ought to be added for a record like this?

P: Only this. I think, probably, that the South acted badly under Johnson. He spoke of the Eastern press and Eastern interests and intellectual elite and the way they looked down on him, but I fought the South more than any area of this country--my own native region. Because here was a man who, like all of us, was trying to break free of his beginnings and become a more progressive national man. We villified him in the South. We excoriated him, we pillaried the man. He became a treacherous son of Southern soil. I sort of had a feeling of what Andrew Johnson must have gone through, and any other Southerner--including Richard Russell who wanted to be President in '52 and found the rest of the country prejudiced against him. Well, look at the 1960's. The South had a President in the White House. You'd think the feeling of kinsmanship would have been sufficient to have gained him at least the support that Kennedy enjoyed. But it didn't. And to me this was probably the central tragedy of his life.

B: I might add, I'm a Southerner too. Most of that anti-Johnson sentiment in the South seemed to be just simply irrational.

P: It was irrational because the racial views in the South were irrational. They are born of emotion and apparently the people were incapable of coping with those emotions. Witness the present slide all the way over into Wallace politics. This, to me, cheapens the South. I would have thought more of it--with a Southern President there, I would have thought that we could have responded to the challenges he gave us. But we rebelled against them and we kicked over the

traces and just left him--and led the nation in denouncing him. So he was caught by the Northern intellectuals on Viet Nam and by the Southerners on race, and he had very little constituency left.

B: There were some exceptions, of course. Your Atlanta--

P: Yes.

B: Stood out as a citidel of moderation through these years.

P: Well, it took a little struggle but Atlanta did during that decade stand out. But it's, it's--

B: Right. It accepted the leadership of people like you, McGill, and Ivan Allan and Police Chief Jenkins and probably many others I'm not aware of.

P: Yes. We had a period in Atlanta when movement was possible and the city moved. But this was far too limited in the South and I must say I despaired, at the end of the Johnson years, of southern leadership being able to lead Southerners. It perhaps is a habit of history that the South is negative and backs into the future. This may not be bad. You know, look before you leap. History will tell us that. Certainly in racial matters, now, I think the South is moving more rationally than the North, the urban areas of the North.

So, we live one time and it's a fleeting time and whatever we do is infinitesimal. But I have a feeling that Johnson gave his years an attempt to educate his own people as well as trying to bridge the gap between Southernism and the nation. And, if you say he failed, all right, he failed. But this man did lead to some understandings. He forced us to face things we wished to hide. He made the South look at itself and its racial attitudes. He made the nation look at its role in the world and he made the whole society a

little more aware of its obligation to its neighbors. So, I give him high marks as President with all his failures, personal and political.

B: Thank you very much, Mr. Patterson.

P: Okay.

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By Eugene Patterson

to the

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