INTERVIEW II

DATE: October 29, 1974

INTERVIEWEE: ESTHER PETERSON

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Mrs. Peterson's residence in Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 2

P: It all kind of blends together a little bit within my memory. But it is true that before the Kennedy election I did not know Lyndon Johnson well personally. He got acquainted with me and I think had gained respect for me during the Moss campaign in 1956. I'm quite sure of that. Well, I know that's what happened, because later on Bobby Baker asked me to help him when Johnson was wanting the presidential nomination, and I at that time had said I was already lined up with Kennedy. So things were a little tense there. In the Moss campaign where Bobby Baker was sent out with a lot of money to get Ted's vote on the oil depletion allowance, I remember the very difficult part there. I think I rightly or wrongly played some part in getting Ted not to go along with that, even though we needed the money and that caused a lot of trouble later with some Johnson people.

G: This involved a large contribution, I think ten thousand dollars.

P: Yes. Ten thousand dollars that we were being offered.

G: As I understand it, this was money from the Democratic Campaign Committee.

P: Bobby Baker brought it, and I think Stanley Fike was involved a little bit. The money was from the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. But, I was never sure whether that was oil money or Democratic National Committee money. My feeling was more that it was oil money, but I'm not sure. Maybe you have gone into that with others, I don't know.

G: Yes, this has been a topic of discussion. I understand it came out well in the end because someone did get him some money that he desperately needed.

P: I worked awfully hard on the money raising that time, but of course we got it pretty much through labor groups. That's where Bob Hinkley and Earle Clements helped so much. I think I put that in the interview before. Yes, he did get it, but he did not bow to LBJ on that nor did he bow to him on the Rule 22 vote on cloture. I think he always felt that that was why he didn't get as good committee assignments as he deserved.

G: So you do think that Bobby Baker was representing Lyndon Johnson in that?

P: I do. I do.

G: I think in Senator Douglas's book, In the Fullness of Time, he indicates that a lady was responsible for securing the needed money.

P: I wonder if he means me?

G: I was wondering about that.

P: Because, boy, I'm trying to think of how much I did raise in those days; I just stayed on the phone with my friends in the labor movement.

You see, the hard thing was convincing Bobby Baker that we could win. He was a clever person, and that was the first personal kind of confrontation I had with Bobby. Here I was the new one from the outside, but I knew my state, I think.

G: What was he like, Bobby Baker?

P: Oh, a very sharp guy, very, very sharp guy. I liked him. You know he was tough to work with. He was a great deal like LBJ, and he was very headstrong. I think he respected me, but you know we never had any--I was not his type. You know he had women, and I think he was not used to working professionally with somebody like me. All the little smoke-filled-room kind of incidents that we had were really something. They are not for the books, but they were really something. It was a little bit for me from my background of strict Mormonism to kind of fall into this sort of thing, but I accepted it and I kept saying to myself, "Esther, as a professional woman you've got to forget it." You don't let these things affect you because of the overriding importance of having Moss win, which I really felt very strongly about.

G: Is there anything about the realities of politics that you learned here?

P: Yes. This is why the naivete of so many amateurs in the political battles really kind of shakes me, because unless you've really been part of that and had to raise money and had to get votes and had to press it precinct by precinct and how do you hit the waves of the things that make for the climate--how do you capitalize on events--

you've just got to have it, that's all, a feel for it. My father used to say: Arrange the dam so that the water that's already there goes down your irrigation ditch.

G: Let's talk about Lyndon Johnson and labor. He had friends and enemies in organized labor. Why was this?

P: I think because of the great conflict within [him]. I think there must have been a conflict within him because I think he really, I felt later on, was way down deep a populist, or whatever you want to call his background and had that whole [outlook]. Part of it was that, but again as a terrific, superb politician, his Texas base was not a liberal base. I'll never forget his telling me--I believe it was during his campaign for the Democratic nomination for president in 1960--"Just wait until I get out of here." And I remember Helen Douglas telling me about the same thing, and John Kenneth Galbraith telling me the same thing: "Esther, you're all wet. You just get him in the White House, and he'll be terrific."

G: This was what Helen Gahagan Douglas told you?

P: Yes. Helen told me that. But I didn't believe her. And the day at the convention when Kennedy announced that he was going to have Johnson as his vice president I was so furious I took the next plane home. But Galbraith got hold of me and said, "Esther, you're all wet; you just are all wet." And it took me some time [to get over it].

G: I noticed that Walter Reuther was not a friend of his politically.

P: No, and I was under Walter's wing somewhat, you see.

G: Did LBJ in a sense play to his advantage the conflict within organized labor, such as the AF of L and--?

P: Oh, it's been said that he did. I'd hate to say he did. I never saw it.

G: He seemed to have been drawn more closely to George Meany.

P: Yes. I think he had more in common with him than with Reuther; he was a more pragmatic kind of practical fellow, as was George Meany.

G: Was it easier for him to please Meany than Walter Reuther?

P: Oh yes. Heavens yes. Oh yes. Then I think there is a whole chapter in there, too, that I don't know, I never touched on, and that was the relationship with Bob Oliver to LBJ and to Walter Reuther. Because there Walter was walking both sides of the street, too, off and on.

G: Let's talk about this. What was Oliver's role?

P: He was Walter's representative--a consultant--I don't know, kind of an unofficial one, because you know the background of when Andy Biemiller got to be head of the legislative division of the AFL-CIO. Bob had been head for the CIO part. So there was a legitimate, honest problem there with the merger, and I think that Walter took on Oliver as his consultant--I just don't know whether he was on the IUD payroll or whether he was on Walter's UAW payroll. I really don't know. But anyway that was a conflict, because I was legislative representative of the IUD, and I found myself running in conflict with him frequently on the hill, with Bob Oliver. And it bothered me when I found that as his private business clients he had

people who were working against a lot of the things that we were working for and which the IUD had policy statements [on]. And you know I was young and gung ho, not young but I was gung ho on the issues at that time. Those were pretty rough periods for me.

G: Can you recall any occasions when he was enlisted by Lyndon Johnson to help in the Johnson brokerage [of something]?

P: Oh, I'm sure he was. He got along very well with Senator Russell and Senator George and with LBJ and all of those who were his close allies in the Senate. Bob was very good, too, I don't want to [imply he wasn't], because he was a very skillful lobbyist, very, very good. When he was with us, he was wonderful.

G: He must have been.

P: He was a terrific guy, and he could walk these lines. He had far more experience with that sort of thing than I had ever had. You see, I wasn't part of the insider club. I stuck to the issues. I kind of came into it from the sidelines lots more. The person who really got deep into the puzzling relationship of Reuther and Oliver was Paul Sifton, who is dead, because the conflict there was between the Washington UAW staff, which Sifton headed, and Bob Oliver. Bob would kind of do end runs around the Washington legislative staff, and it just used to make Paul Sifton furious because he was the legislative person there. I'll never forget when the Congressional Record came out with the lobbyist reports listing a lot of Bob's clients. That created quite a to-do in the board meeting of the IUD, and at that time I got dragged into it pretty badly, because

I backed up what Paul Sifton was saying about Bob's conflicts of interest. It was a rough thing. Arthur Goldberg then was great; he would comment, "This will pass." But it was very, very rough for a while, very rough.

G: What about David Dubinsky and his relations with [Sidney Hillman]?

P: It's all very complicated because David and Hillman were friends and then enemies. You go through all these interweaving periods of the labor movement at that time. Dubinsky moved over to Meany far more and away from Walter. I think part of that was the basic fight that was going on between Hillman [and Dubinsky], and then when Hillman died things moved and Dubinsky was kind of moving into a position of leadership of the CIO group. As he got older I think he found more compatibility with Meany, than with Reuther.

G: Can you recall any of these national leaders helping LBJ with organized labor in Texas?

P: I think Bob Oliver is the one who did most of that. You must have interviewed him.

G: I think we have an interview with him.

P: Oh, I'm sure you would. Who was head of it down there, Brown? Who was head of the AFL-CIO down there? Great big swell guy, I liked him so much. I used to go down there to the conventions to speak. He had a very good relationship with LBJ. He was the president of the state federation, and a lot of LBJ's labor support in Texas came from Brown. But I think Bob was the one who did a lot, and then Earle Clements, you mustn't underestimate Earle Clements in

this whole picture because he was a good operator. I learned a lot from him, and I really admired him an awful lot.

G: Can you give me an example?

P: I used to be in touch with Clements almost every day during the Moss campaign in 1956, and I'd ask him how you do this and: "Try this, Esther. Try that, Esther." I think one of the best examples is when he helped me get LBJ in the day before the election in Utah.

G: What were the logistics of that? What was Clements' role?

P: Clements was working with the Senatorial Campaign Committee, and I think that I had been influential in getting Earle to think that we could win that one in Utah. It had been kind of written off. But there it was Earle who really [helped]. We were just in very close. I remember feeling that if we didn't make the headlines that last day, and if we didn't make the radio and the whole business heavy with a big barrage, we just couldn't have the momentum to really put Moss over; my little polls were feeling that way. But Earle did it. I mean, he got him [Johnson] to fly in, and we arranged a last minute thing and made it sound like it was a hoopla.

G: Were you in Johnson's presence during that trip?

P: Oh, yes. I was right there, and he told me afterwards that he felt that Moss would never have made it without me.

G: LBJ said that?

P: LBJ said that, yes.

G: Can you describe Johnson's visit, I mean, behind the scenes?

P: He flew in, good Lord, and George Reedy came with him I remember, and Juanita Roberts. We were able to get him to make a detour to land in Salt Lake before he moved on to another place where he was scheduled. So he was only there for about an hour, but we quickly got a luncheon together on the roof garden of the hotel. We did not have television--they didn't do as much with it in those days, you know how it was--but we did have a lot of radio, and I remember getting it tight so it sounded like a big [crowd]. I'd learned a few things like that to make it sound like it was a tremendously big [crowd]. Before he came, we worked with the issues of what he was to say when he got there and the things that he was to hit, and that we did through Bob Hinkley and through Earle. George Hatch, who was head of one of the major radio stations in Utah, helped a little bit on that, with the radio arrangements, he worked pretty closely with us. He was a good Democrat, strongly for Moss.

G: Was he pretty amenable to your suggestions?

P: Oh, yes, he was fine. Yes, he was. Johnson, you mean.

G: Was he pumping people for suggestions?

P: Whether Johnson pumped them personally [I don't know]. By the time he got to Utah the speech was pretty well ready, but we had done a lot of the negotiating on this on the telephone. It's hard for me to remember specifically. My memory pretty much was that the speech content was worked out through Bob and Earle.

G: Was the speech the one on the roof garden?

P: Yes, it was up on the roof garden. It was in the roof restaurant of the Hotel Utah.

G: How many people were there?

P: Oh, I'll bet we didn't have more than probably two hundred.

G: But it had media coverage, I guess?

P: It had terrific media coverage, and we did make the headlines. But we had worked awfully hard to do that.

G: What did you do?

P: You go over and talk to the editors; you talk to the good reporters; and do all these little things around the corners. You get the labor people and your friends to come and make an audience. And you see, also you've got to remember that I had to lay low a little bit because of my labor background, which in Utah was considered not quite respectable in leading circles. We were accused that I was in Walter Reuther's pocket, and "Here was this awful woman--" They pictured me as an outsider. And then I had to come out and look like a Mormon. I grew up in Utah, and I knew I'd have to [look conservative]. Oh, God, I had to just be so careful to hold myself in and not rock the boat and had to play up my Utah background. I tried not to be visible. I tried to do the organizing behind the scenes instead of out front because [to] [Mayor J.] Braken Lee [of Salt Lake City] and others I was a communist, I was this dangerous woman. "Who is she?" you know. So I would just say: "I'm from Utah. I was raised here. I went to Brigham Young University. I'm a Mormon." It was all those

crosscurrents that you have to keep in mind in a campaign like you have in Utah.

G: We've found them talking to a lot of people who were on campaign trails with LBJ that he could always find something in an advance setup or a speaking situation that could be improved. Was this the case here?

P: I'm sure it was, because he did a lot of ad-libbing. The nice thing he did, I know, was he pointed to different people in the audience; he pointed me out on something, and it just pleased me no end, because I was never sure whether we had made up. You know what I mean? Because I had always been kind of on the other side, the very liberal wing, and I was conscious of that. No, he did. You see, he had a very superb sensitivity to crowds and the situation. I tell you, I went with McGovern a little bit in 1972 and, oh, how awful he is at that political skill, how awful he is. You know I thought in 1972, "My word, if McGovern had just that much of LBJ's sensitivity, sense." All you needed to do is give LBJ a situation, and he could rise to it.

G: Can you be more specific? He pointed you and other people out?

P: He talked Utah and not Washington. He made headlines for us by relating the campaign issues to Utah people and he did it superbly. Oh, I wonder if I don't have in my files a note from that meeting, the clippings or whatever.

G: Is there anything during the 1960 campaign that you want to add? You were working for Senator Kennedy.

P: In the 1960 campaign I was working for Kennedy, right.

G: And you were solicited by Bobby Baker, you said.

P: Yes. Oh, you know how you do it, kind of around the corner, these edgy things. I told Bobby Baker I was committed to Kennedy, and that was that. Then when we came back after the 1960 election, I remember Johnson being very friendly with me. I remember the rounds of cocktail parties up on the Hill after the election when I would run into him all the time in one senator's office or congressman's office or another, the victory parties, and his coming and putting his arms around me, and I felt that we were back on base again, as friends.

G: Was he lighthearted? What was he like?

P: Oh, yes, yes. Oh, he was lighthearted. He was a little risque, which was fun and not fun; you know the kinds of things. I remember some of the stories he told on Phyllis Moss were really something. I guess from my kind of tight Mormon background I had to bend an awful lot, so it was a period of growth for me. I had to learn to dish it back, and that was good. There was nothing bad about it.

G: Can you give us an example of some of these antics here?

P: I don't know if these are the kinds of things you're talking about, but this was him, here is this earthy guy. I remember his telling me the tale of getting Ted and Phyllis Moss down to the Ranch and trying to teach Phyllis how to shoot and her breasts always getting in the way of the gun. (Laughter) You know, this kind of thing.

And he'd make roars, all these kinds of things. That's typical of the sort of thing it was.

G: Did you have much contact with him while he was vice president?

P: I went over, I think as I said earlier, and said, "Look, you're vice president now and let's work together," and he was great. I have a picture with him up in my library upstairs that I really cherish of that day when we sort of kissed and made up. I felt that he did feel that I had ability, because I think he did respect what I did in the Moss campaign. I don't think I had meant anything to him before that period, because this was his way of showing his political sensitivity.

G: Do you feel that he as vice president was unhappy, that he was not given enough to do?

P: Oh, yes. Sure. There again is where he meant an awful lot to me, because he helped me so much on some of these bills that I was working on. I think I tried to say that in our previous interview.

G: While he was vice president.

P: While he was vice president. He was available; he came to my office in the Labor Department I don't know how many times for meetings. I remember two specifically when he came. He opened his house to the Commission on the Status of Women while he was vice president. One of my problems, which I didn't talk about in that [earlier interview], was my conflict of a deep feeling of loyalty to Kennedy and also the feeling that I was getting so much real help from Johnson, during the part on the Status of Women Commission, for

example, and some of those things where Johnson really supported. I kept feeling that we had to make a contribution in this [women's] area, that this is something that could be done. I felt the whole women's thing coming, too. I think if anything I've had a sensitivity to what big issues were arising in our country, and that was one, as well as the consumers one; safety is another. I think this is because of my experience out in the field. Talking to people and being around with people, I believe you develop a sensitivity to the coming up of issues, and the thing I liked about Johnson was his ability to see that. That was very good for me and very exciting for me.

G: Specifically, how did he help you on that [Status of] Women's Commission?

P: Well, he helped me a lot on the commission; he just said, "We've got to do something on that." I remember outlining the idea to him. I worked with him and worked with Liz Carpenter on it a bit, on how we'd get around the tennis shoe ladies and how we'd make it a big national issue rather than a petty thing of a few women's groups. He had the big view on this. That again was the sort of thing he was so good at.

G: Can you recall his expressions or his philosophy on the thing in detail?

P: Not in detail. I don't have that kind of memory. Isn't that awful? I can see myself sitting there; I can see myself talking to him; I can see myself outlining the idea. You see, the way I operate,

I'll have an idea and I'll try it out, and I don't really get it down for a long time down the pike. But it's not just mine; I kind of weave these other things with it.

But on that, let me finish that just a minute, I remember when we finally worked [it] out I thought, "Now do I get Johnson to really carry the ball on this and let this be a Johnson thing, or is it a Kennedy thing?" I remember going to Arthur Goldberg and saying, "Now, look, I can get this moving with LBJ. Kennedy's the president. How do I handle this?" And I remember talking to Ralph and to Myer Feldman and outlining it very carefully, and Myer saying some days later, "Look, Jack thinks it's a good idea and that he had better handle it. He'd better do this; it had better be a president's commission." Then I remember going immediately to LBJ. I dealt very straight with him. That's one thing I liked about him, and that's, I think, what disappointed me later in the White House, because I lost that relationship when Califano came between us, and others. I lost that contact. I think my deep regret is that if I had been able to really have access to him I wouldn't have had a lot of the trouble that I had.

G: You went back to LBJ, now, after [seeing Feldman].

P: I went back to LBJ and talked to him about it and we agreed that it would be a president's committee and we'd work on it and he'd help with us.

G: Was he disappointed that you didn't go ahead with it?

P: No, no. I never felt bitterness with him on these things, no. Then on the equal pay bill, he really was so great in helping me get that one and helping me with the maneuverability of the issues on the Hill.

G: What did he do on that?

P: Well, when I finally got the bill cleared through the administration I remember hand carrying it up to him, and he is the one who took it and assigned it to committee personally and gave it his personal blessing, which meant a hell of a lot to me, enabling me to go out and say that the Vice President has personally endorsed this. He had a picture taken of my handing the bill to him; you know, it was worth I can't [tell you how much]. This is again that little subtle kind of thing that I liked about him so much, and that was a sensitivity I didn't get from Kennedy on this issue. It was that part of his political know-how that so impressed me.

G: Could it have been that Johnson at this time had time on his hands and Kennedy was so busy with issues of the early 1960s?

P: Probably. Probably. Yes, I think so; it could easily be. When you saw the President you were aware of all the pressures on him and you were never wanting to take too much of his time. But LBJ as vice president gave his time very generously.

G: I think that during this period also you rode down on a plane with him to Eleanor Roosevelt's funeral. Is that right?

P: Yes, I did.

G: Can you recall that trip?

P: You know, all those nice little things that he did in those early days which all got turned off when he became president and when Califano came into the White House. I've always wondered what the hell [happened]. And Jack Valenti, those were the two thorns in my side, as I look back. I mean [before] there was always this nice freedom.

I remember when we went down on a plane together, and we talked about Eleanor. He liked her better than Kennedy did, so he was supportive of me in getting her to be chairman of the Commission on the Status of Women. By the way, that was another little problem I had with Jack. I had to ask Eleanor Roosevelt; Jack would not do it. Well now, whether he was busy or [not I don't know], but they had had a real rough time together. But LBJ agreed with me that it should be Eleanor, that she was the woman in the country that everyone looked to, and he supported me on that. And of course I said to Jack, "Oh, LBJ really feels she should be the one." You know, before I went to Jack on these things I built up all my little defenses so he couldn't say no. That's all part of the way you put these things together.

G: He sort of advised you in this.

P: Oh, yes. Another thing he advised me on, which was great, was to have on the commission only the top people, the cabinet people not the assistants, not the rest of them. If you're going to do it, you have got to do it for real. That was a very, very great lesson to me, and Jack bought that idea. Arthur Goldberg helped an awful

lot in that whole period, too, I must say. That's when Johnson got Ellen Boddy on, which I couldn't understand, which turned out to be very great. She was splendid. You see there again, whether he was paying a political debt or not, I like to believe that he recognized that if this commission was going to be any good it had to have its feet on the ground, and that is again where his skill came in a lot. But he also didn't neglect that, by golly, you've got to have [Luther H.] Hodges and you've got to have all the big shots. Anyway, you see what I mean; you balanced it with these things. And nobody has matched the quality and effectiveness of that commission yet in the women's area. Nobody. Nixon's is just a silly marshmallow compared with it.

G: What about Eleanor Roosevelt? Of course, we never got an interview with her. What was her attitude toward LBJ?

P: I think she respected him as a good, practical politican, really. You see, she was so open she would differ with him on whatever. But I remember the meeting we had over at his house was very, very friendly and extremely--

G: She was there?

P: Oh, yes, she came. I'll never forget (laughing). I don't believe I told it in the other [interview]. She had been at the meeting. Again, this is the kind of blessing he gave to it: "You have the meeting. Come out to my house for a party."

G: This was The Elms.

P: This was The Elms. Everyone on the commission was delighted by this "official stamp of approval" from the Vice President. You can imagine what that meant to us to have that type of support. That's why I give him so many kudos for that. Now I know Jack was busy with a lot of other kinds of things at that time, but I got that top-level administrative support all the time from LBJ as vice president, which I never got--or seldom got--after he moved into the office of the president. That's why it's always been a dilemma in my mind: "What did I do wrong?" you know, "What in the hell did I do that lost that relationship" with LBJ.

G: I think you were going to tell us about [the meeting at The Elms].

P: Oh, one of these incidents. Yes, I get wandering, excuse me. This woman [Ellen Boddy] was fantastic at the first meeting. She didn't know what a minimum wage was; she had no concept of women who had to work. She just asked the most naive questions that you could possibly believe, and we all sat around the room and just gulped, just gulped! And in the car going out to LBJ's that night, she [Mrs. Roosevelt] said to me, "Where did you find that person?" I told her that it was one that LBJ had requested be on the committee. I wish I could remember, because she used kind of a slang expression, "She doesn't know anything from anything," or--I was a little shocked, I remember, thinking of the kind of a slang way that Mrs. Roosevelt put it, because she was usually quite precise in her English, in her language.

Then we got out to The Elms and we were in the receiving line, and I was to introduce everybody to Mrs. Roosevelt, and then LBJ and Lady Bird were right there. I remember she came through and I said, "Mrs. Boddy." "Yes." And after she [Mrs. Boddy] got through the line she [Mrs. Roosevelt] turned to LBJ and said, "I wonder where she came from?" (Laughter) She made some little remark about it, and I just didn't look at her. I'll never forget. But on the way back at night when I was taking her back to her son Jim's house, where she was staying, I said, "Oh, Mrs. Roosevelt, I was going to split when you turned to LBJ with your comment about Mrs. Boddy," and she said, "I didn't look at you, Mrs. Peterson, at that moment for fear we'd both laugh." It was an interesting little sidelight on her sense of humor at that time, but she also learned to respect Mrs. Boddy, which was nice. But it was kind of funny.

G: Did Eleanor Roosevelt ever try to persuade LBJ to promote more liberal legislation?

P: I don't know. I don't know.

G: I know that she was very close to Adlai Stevenson, and he was not. Did she attempt to improve relations here, do you know?

P: I don't know, really. I don't believe I could honestly say that, and I don't know how much she saw him. She saw him when we worked on this commission; I don't believe she had another session with him on the women's thing, so I don't know.

G: I've often heard, of course LBJ was a great admirer of Franklin Roosevelt, that Mrs. Roosevelt felt that he had drifted too far to the right.

P: I'm sure that's true. I remember I happened to talk to her about LBJ being the one who was really helping us a lot with it. She accepted it, but I don't think with any great warmth.

G: Did she warn you about him?

P: I don't remember that particularly. I had known her in liberal causes for many years, and I would think that she trusted me. She almost accepted this, I think, as a personal favor to me, to be the chairman.

G: That gave your commission a good deal of clout.

P: Oh, yes. Yes.

G: We had started on that trip down to Mrs. Roosevelt's funeral as an example of LBJ's kindness.

P: Yes. Yes. A lot of little things like that happened--you know, "Fly down with me, Esther." I know I was invited; I don't know even whether the call came from his office or not. Then after he became president and he was going down to the UAW convention, I got a call that he wanted me to go, and I went then. I was always reluctant to push myself forward on these things. I remember getting down to the convention and Jack Valenti coming and saying, "Oh, the President wants you to ride with him." They moved me up to his plane on the way back.

I remember then thinking, "Oh, gee, shall I talk to him about all these problems and things that I have?" I stewed about it. The plane was full of others--Bill Simpson was on, I remember he [Johnson] talked to me a little bit about Polly Bunting, getting her on the Atomic Energy Commission, which we thought was good. We talked about appointing women. Then I could see he was tired, and he leaned back and kind

of closed his eyes, and I thought, "Esther, please don't; don't bother him." But he had me sit right by him, which meant a lot to me at that time. And I always thought, oh why, when I had that moment, didn't I tell him some of my problems. But to tell you the truth, I really felt so sorry for that man, with all the burdens he had to carry. I really felt like, "Esther, these things of yours, you should not have to go to the President with this stuff."

G: What do you think he wanted, in retrospect? Do you think he wanted you to take the matters up, say, through Califano or another aide and have that aide make the decision, or do you think he really wanted you to bother him?

P: I don't really know. I don't really know. I just don't think it was a deliberate thing, I think it was absolutely preoccupation and this enclosure around him built by Jack Valenti. You see, again, with Busby I didn't have as much trouble. Marv Watson I had problems with; I had problems with Valenti, Watson and Califano. I didn't have problems with Busby. When I got to Busby, we could work it out.

G: How about Bill Moyers?

P: No problems with him either, and I know the time when I really was fed up and wrote a letter of resignation explaining why, Bill talked me into putting it back in my pocket.

G: Would you elaborate on this? Was this the AFA thing?

P: I think the time was when we were having the trouble on the truth in lending issue. There were three big crises that I had. One was with the advertisers, and I still feel that that goes back to Jack Valenti.

I really feel that Jack didn't treat me fairly at that time. The three big crises: that one, the boycotts, the truth in lending, they were my big crises in the consumer job.

G: You went into the AFA thing last time, and I think the essence of this was that Valenti arranged for LBJ to speak at their meeting the following year. Was this the Valenti input to the--?

P: Yes. This was after I refused to speak at their convention because of their attacks on me.

G: Okay. Then on the boycotts?

P: And Humphrey went over and did it; Johnson didn't speak to the AFA after all.

G: Oh yes. Okay. What about the boycotts? Can you tell us about this?

P: Well, I think it's very important for the record to show that now. Now that I am with Giant Food, I've started working with these fellows, some of the food industry people, who were my enemies before, and you can imagine the fun I'm having, to go full circle. This is why I'm filling in with a lot of this stuff, because they tell me, some of my friends in the business community, that there were those in the White House that told them when I was in the consumer office that the President wanted to get rid of me, that I was going too far. During my days at the White House some of the food industry people were beginning to work with me on the consumer program and see that maybe I did have something worthwhile going. So I don't know; these are little iffy things. Who's the fellow that was Nixon's economic adviser? It starts with an H. Up in New England. Anyway, when

Joe Danzansky--and I'd really love to get this into the record and get maybe an interview with him on it--talked with me about taking the job with Giant, he told me that when I had had a lot of rather rough times about the boycotts, and the feeling was that I had instigated them, which I hadn't, that the whole thing was a Republican "dirty trick." Joe told me that at one of the meetings of the board of the food people this man said that the boycotts were a deliberate plan of the Republican Party to embarrass President Johnson, and they knew me well enough to know that I would get involved and take the side of the consumers. "That's not Esther's thing." That's not my imagination speaking. This is J. B. Danzansky saying it, which I think is a chapter that ought [to be told].

G: Gee, that's interesting. In retrospect, does it sound plausible?

P: Absolutely. As I look back on it now I can see how true it was, because the housewives were aroused by the price increases and there was genuine boycotting. I went up to the congressman that called me, "Help, help, help!" I was in such demand as a speaker during that period I was wearing myself out. Lots of Democratic congressmen wanted me to speak in their districts about food prices. At that time LBJ was on a trip--it was the South Pacific trip or something, I can't remember which one it was--and I remember Joe Califano and the man who was his assistant. . . . What's his name? Oh, he's a nice kid. [Lawrence] Levinson, wasn't it? Anyway, he was saying, "Esther, come on, every paper we pick up your name is there, and it's feeding this thing." I said, "But look, if I don't stand up

for the consumers at this time, what am I?" The one instruction that LBJ had given me when I took the job was, "Esther, I want every housewife in this country to know that I'm in her corner." That's just about all the instruction I had from him. I just took this [to mean], "I've got to identify myself with the housewife and her problems. I've got to identify myself with the problems so that the people in the White House are also sensitive to these problems." Anyway, whether I did it right or wrong, I did it. I felt that it was the right thing to do, to speak to the complaining housewives and let them know we were listening to their complaints and try to do something about them, like trading stamps, games and gimmicks.

But I'll never forget getting up into Rochester, I think it was, being asked to come up there to talk to some of these women boycotters and going out and seeing them all made up. They said, "We were told that we would be on television if we would do this"--picket and so on. I can just see it to this day, and I thought, "To hell you'll be on television." Not with me. I really worked around and got other customers to talk to and I just ditched those ladies as fast as I could. I spotted them as "plants." This was long before I heard the background story from Danzansky.

G: You think they were possibly Republicans?

P: Absolutely! Oh, sure! I think they were part of the whole--oh, you know, we all do those things in politics, the dirty tricks department; this is to be understood about it. I think the Denver episode was probably part of the same attempt to discredit me and the things my

office was doing. In Rochester, that's why there I did an end run around those who were all made up for the television cameras. I think I did this by instinct, and got to the bona fide consumer groups instead to find the reality of their problems and not the television trimmings.

But to make a real issue on this was something else. But you see at that time it was very difficult to get Joe Califano and the others to really look at what was bothering people. I wanted them to get the Federal Trade Commission to say, "Look, we'll have an investigation into the costs of the supermarket games and gimmicks and trading stamps." I felt if we could just get the political heat off from the much publicized boycotts of housewives and admit the problem, politically we could [gain]. I remember finally out in Denver taking the bull by the horns myself--I'd really like to look up the old clips, news clippings on this--and saying, "I am today, I, Esther Peterson, asking the Federal Trade Commission" to make an investigation. I did it on my own because I couldn't get any clearance from the White House on these "crazy" things, as they called them. This is what used to make me so furious, that they were not sensitive to the political sounds that I felt were there. I think I've been proved right on it.

G: Now, generally, you would report to whom?

P: At first I reported to Jenkins; I mean my memos would be from me to the President. I tried doing a weekly report, and I quit that finally because I found they weren't even read. I thought, to hell with

them. I could send in a fairy story and they wouldn't know the difference.

G: Where along the way would the communication be cut off?

P: It was not cut off as long as Walter Jenkins was there; I got answers, I got telephone calls back, I got help on setting up the program. When he left is when the thing fell down, in my book.

G: So it was primarily, you'd say, Califano?

P: Well, you see, after Jenkins it was then Valenti and then Califano; Busby was there, too, but while he was helpful to me on a number of things I didn't have as much to do with him as with the others. I had no problem with him. And then Marv Watson.

G: I think that the third crisis that you were going to talk about was truth in lending, is that right?

P: That was when I think I should have resigned and didn't.

G: Would you go into this again?

P: We were working on the President's consumer message. A lot of these things used to bother me, too, and at this time I think I'd like to go back to something else. Help me remember it.

When LBJ asked me to be the consumer adviser, we went to the Ranch--and that whole business of the Ranch that I told you about--and came back, and the first assignment I had was to draft a consumer message for the President. We had an agreement at the Ranch that he would give a consumer message, and it was to follow up what Kennedy's message had said and done. So I and Dave Swankin and Aryness Wickens sat in my living room for I don't know how many days and wrote that

message. None of us had ever written for LBJ, and I'm not a writer. I had ideas, but Aryness was good and had done a lot of presidential messages and things like this. We sent it in, and LBJ didn't like it. I was sort of under Walter Heller in a way, although I didn't report to him, because the Consumer Advisory Council was originally under Walter Heller's Council of Economic Advisers--the President's Committee on Consumer Interests was under that, or the council was. Walter was the one who could really write for LBJ. I remember the President not liking our draft and our having to get it rewritten in a day and trying to do it and finally Walter Heller doing it, bless his sweet heart.

I remember going over with Walter to the President, and somebody took it in to his office. I guess it was Jack. Or was it Marv? I'm trying to think who was in the outer office then; I can't remember. Anyway, pretty soon LBJ came out and said, "Now this is what I like! Who wrote it?" And Walter said, "I did." I thought, "You bastard!" Because all he did was redo the punctuation and things; there was not another idea in it. I could have fallen through the floor. I felt so awful. If he'd said at least, "Look, I took the material, but I organized it the way you like it." That kind of thing I always felt was happening to me all down the line in the White House. And the implication was more than "Walter Heller wrote it." It was that "the one Esther wrote was no good at all." That really hurt. I've compared the two drafts. Walter took the sentences and put bullets on them. They are identical in content. There isn't a

new idea in the message at all, not a single one that didn't come from our version.

Walter was great, I'm not underestimating him. He knew how to write for LBJ. It was a special skill. But I always felt these ego power fights, which I just wasn't good at [were bad]. Well anyway, that goes back to the way the problems started--we got on to doing a little better after that, and I got a professional writer. I haven't talked also about getting that damn office set up, which was something else I ought to talk about some time, but then you're getting lots more out of me now than I ever wanted to say before, I think partly because of my affection for LBJ. Maybe in my older [years], as I get back looking at it, I can see it more objectively. But I must say a lot of the hurts came forward, and I don't like to be personal in it either.

But on that truth in lending issue, we were drafting a presidential message which went into specifics on the bill. We had worked on it and Califano worked on it, and I was fighting like mad to keep annual interest rate disclosure in the truth in lending bill. The credit industry was fighting for a monthly rate disclosure only. It kept dropping out, and then I'd call to find out why these changes were being made, and gradually I felt that message being taken away from me. Then I remember the day it was to go in finally, I can remember calling from home, and I'm afraid I became a nuisance to Califano. But I didn't know what the hell to do, and I felt so strongly about that issue, that LBJ would be making a mistake if

he didn't have mandatory annual interest percentage in the bill. I know how strongly Douglas felt about it. I'll never forget going over that morning, and walking out of Califano's office was Wilbur Cohen and the head of the FDA, [J. L.] Goddard. I said, "Well, come on, where is the message and where are we at on this?" He [Califano] had had a caucus without asking me in, and he said, "We're going over to have the press conference on the message." I said, "I've got to see it first." He said, "You're not going." I said, "Come on, Joe, are you telling me as consumer adviser to the President that I am not to be at the conference on this message?" He said, "Yes!" and walked out. I remember I said, "I'll be damned!" I was so furious.

I went over to my office and wanted to resign right then, and then I said to myself, "Esther, calm down, calm down, calm down." I had really never had such a hurt, but I had been closed out of having a chance to make my [case]. And it was on that issue. Anyway, I finally talked with Bill Moyers, and Bill said that not having me there was a mistake, but that I should not resign over it. He said, "Esther, come on don't do that now, don't act in haste on this." And then I kept thinking, "Oh God, do I quit or not? Am I petty? Is it just an ego thing?" But then I felt if the President had no confidence in me, I ought to get out, you see.

G: Do you think this was a decision by the President, or do you think Califano was after you?

P: I don't know. I'm told that it probably was the President, that Califano only reflects the President, but I really don't believe it. I don't want to believe it. I don't want to believe it.

G: The newspaper articles and contemporary pieces and also some of the memos seem to stress the political gain to be had from championing consumer issues. In fact, one article even stressed that Jack Kennedy and later LBJ hoped for a broadening and a realignment of the Democratic base by creating consumer issues and sponsoring them. Was this a chief motive, do you think?

P: I think so, yes. I think Kennedy was very sincere on consumer issues and LBJ was too.

G: Did President Johnson ever express to you the political consequences?

P: Oh, yes. He was so sensitive to that all the time. But you've got to remember that when things kind of started going a bit sour for me in the White House I didn't have personal contact with him hardly at all. We would go to the White House, and I'd dance with him. He was always friendly, you know, and I was never cut off those invitation lists.

G: Did he ask you how things were going?

P: No, not particularly.

G: He didn't want to talk shop?

P: I don't think he wanted to talk about my areas very much. At least the opportunities never seemed to be there. I didn't want to use social occasions to press things with him. And who should. I never took advantage of those things. I think that a lot was bad chemistry

between Joe and me and some of the others on the staff maybe, and then I was aggressive, probably in pushing my programs with them. I don't know what was wrong. I'm just not their cup of tea, that's all.

G: Is there anything more you can tell us about the political implications that concerned Johnson here?

P: I have a feeling that they were very definitely aware of this--of the impact of a strong consumer program on a lot of industries they didn't want to shake up, like cattle, for instance. The thing is, I think they wanted a popular political issue, and they wanted this broad base of appearing consumer oriented, but not at the risk of making too many waves. Boy, I'd be sent around to clubs and conventions and women's groups, and the more I could do this was fine with them. But I don't think they were willing to really go the next step and pay the price and make the corrections in the marketplace, like on interest rates, like in the packaging bill. Oh God, how we had to compromise on that bill. You know, things like that.

G: Can you go into detail?

P: Let me give you one good example that I think Ed Morgan picked up in one of his broadcasts once. I don't know where he got it, but it was absolutely true. When I was working on the packaging bill we were working toward standardization of package size and shapes then. Seeing the metric system coming was part of it. Even then I remember saying, "Look, this [the metric system] is going to come, we're going to have far more international trade." My husband was a foreign service

officer, so while I was living abroad I got a sensitivity to a lot of these things, too, in some of these countries where we served. So we were working toward a package standardization goal. My aim way down the pike was standardization of package sizes that would be competitive in international trade, adaptable to palletizing, which is not practical when you have a lot of odd-sized products, and these things that I had learned. The grocery manufacturers and chambers of commerce and NAM and the others just went after me, oh, so terribly you know, and not attacks on details of issues but personal attacks on me, which were rough at that time.

We had to compromise, but I remember being asked about costs to industry of the packaging proposals. I said that I didn't know about costs, but I remember trying to talk to Paul Willis of GMA [Grocery Manufacturers Association] and some of the others, saying, "Look, let's sit down and really look at what this really means" [in terms of cost to industry]. Before I knew it, I was called by [Kermit Gordon]. He was head of the Bureau of the Budget at that time--no, it wasn't Kermit. I think it was Valenti who called me--and he said, "Esther, you owe a big firm an apology." I said, "I owe an apology? What do you mean?" He said, "LBJ was given a brief on what the cost to industry of your wild ideas would be." Then I said, "Let's see it and find out what it's all about." Well we got the brief, and it was a long legal document--and it must be in the files someplace--saying that if Mrs. Peterson's something ["hair-brained"] scheme [is accepted] this is what it would cost

this firm. I think it was Quaker Oats, but I'm not sure, or one of those big food companies.

They had based their calculations on the premise that every machine would have to be changed, and then they did all this long documentation on a false premise. I got a good guy on the Bureau of the Budget--I think that's where Kermit Gordon came into it--to analyze it for me, and he told me off the record that it was [inaccurate]. And I had some lawyers look at it, and my own Dave Swankin and some of them. So I went back to Valenti and I said, "To hell with it. If anybody owes an apology they owe me an apology for doing this." I think I did talk to Ed Morgan at that time. I remember he took me to lunch every once in a while over at Sans Souci, and he used to tell me, "Hang in, Esther, come on. Don't let them do all of this stuff to you." I think he did something about it [a broadcast], and it was never questioned again at the White House--no feedback.

But anyway, that's the kind of thing I ran into. These guys would do end runs to the President, and then the poor President would look at this, and wonder what I was getting him into. I don't know if anybody ever went back and corrected with LBJ that that industry brief was just simply a device to defeat the bill. The same thing was true of the auto report, one of the reports we had prepared on auto safety or auto repairs or things like that. I kept saying in my weekly report to the President, over and over again, that this auto report should be released. "I want to publish it. I want to put it out. This is one of the biggest problems we have. We should

be getting this stuff out." No answer. Finally I sent a memo saying, "If I don't hear by such-and-such a time, I assume that that means that I can release it, that I can put it out." So I put it out. Then they called me, and all hell broke loose over at the White House: "The auto industry is here screaming." I said, "Look, that thing has sat on your desk for four months! Now, don't you--"

(Interruption)

G: Let's put that one on tape, though, because that is good. Can you repeat it?

P: Well, it was after the womens commission, and the commission report was going great guns in the newspapers and magazines.

(Interruption)

So when the report came back to us translated into Japanese, I put a little note on it saying, "LBJ, you might enjoy this for your night reading." It came back saying, "Yes I did, but doesn't it suffer a little in translation?" Which I think is just very sweet. This is why I can't think that he really hated me so, you know what I mean?

G: You were talking about the auto industry report.

P: Yes.

G: Who called you from the White House?

P: Oh, I believe probably it was Marv. Or was it Joe? I think it was Marv Watson that called me.

G: What was their complaint?

P: Well, "What is this? Come on, the auto industry is--" (Laughing) And I said, "You know what that is. I have sent in my reports on that issue for the last four months--" and with a copy sitting there of what I had sent them and I've got memos covering everything I did. I had been just very careful about that, to make sure I had kept them informed. I don't remember now, but there's where Dave Swankin can fill you in an awful lot on those details. They just didn't read what I had been sending them. That one on getting our CAC report out--oh, when I think of it, ugh, it was so terrible!

G: Do you want to tell about the CAC? Is that what you were saying?

P: The report of the Consumer Advisory Council--to get it out and published. You see, what I was trying to do was not have [one of] these--and this is LBJ's philosophy, not just mine--highfalutin commissions that never got down to issues that people were concerned about. I think this is because I'm not an economist or a sociologist; I'm a gym teacher, and I have a far more practical approach to these things. So what I tried to do with these fancy reports was to reduce it down to the issues people were concerned about and I built them around the letters that people wrote me. I would always have a fistful of absolute evidence from human beings around the country that this was the issue that was important, you see. In our reports we tried to put them into those terms, and they were rough; they were gutsy. The economists always wanted to put these things in academic jargon and I insisted on using language people understood.

G: What about setting up your office. You indicated there was a problem.

P: Yes. That was a great lesson to me. Kennedy had talked to me about coming to the White House as a special assistant. Then after LBJ became president I got a call from Walter Jenkins to come on down to Texas to the Ranch. I'll never forget Walter calling me, and again I felt friendly with him and with LBJ. We had a nice relationship; you could pick up the phone [and accomplish something]. I remember his saying, "Who is this Moynihan that Bill Wirtz wants to bring down to the Ranch?" It was interesting how they would call me on these little things, "Well give me a brief on this," or, "Give me a story on this," or "Tell me a little bit more about these." Walter and I had a good relationship.

Anyway, I went down with Bill Wirtz on that plane, and I think I've covered the point that I didn't get much instruction from LBJ at that meeting. Then I came back and had all these letters waiting for me at the White House, these boxes of letters that people had written from that one television interview. It was fantastic, just this whole wave of public sentiment. Oh, I've got some of them that are so beautiful, really human: "at last somebody, this great President, at last he's got somebody there in the White House that we can trust," and so on. So then I remember going over to the White House and Jack Valenti meeting me and saying, "Esther, we'll take you over to the Executive Office Building and get an office for you." We went over, and he picked out a room and he said, "Here's a room, and we'll get you a telephone and a secretary. That's all you'll need." I could have fallen through the floor. I said, "But how can I run a

program? How can I do this?" [I'll need a staff--not just a secretary.] "Well, you can do that from your office at the Labor Department; you're doing both." And that, I think, dates my real fundamental feeling that Jack Valenti never wanted the program to get off the ground. I really feel that Jack and Califano were part of that barrier, were the barrier between me and LBJ, but I may be wrong and I may be right.

Then I had to start fighting for a budget, for a staff, and that was rough. There I had to threaten to resign. I remember going to Walter one day and saying, "Walter, I can't do it. This is just not my cup of tea, and so I'll just say that I find I can't do both jobs." And I never would have done it [the resignation] in such a way as to hurt LBJ.

G: This is Walter Jenkins?

P: Walter Heller.

G: Walter Heller, okay. What was his response?

P: Walter Heller's? "You had better not." That's when I finally got, through Heller, ten thousand dollars out of LBJ's contingency fund, and I got Sam Hughes and some of them to help me work out a way of getting more money. Well, what I did was work it a little bit like we did the funds for the President's Commission on the Status of Women, [on] which I'll never forget Arthur Goldberg. I had asked him: "How are we going to finance the President's Commission?" and he put in the document the words "To be financed in a manner to be determined." I'll never forget those words as long as I live!

Tape 2 of 2

G: I think we were going to talk about the transportation?

P: Oh, yes. When I asked about it, and when they asked me to hold both jobs, which is what Bill [Wirtz] wanted--this of course may be part of my basic trouble, too, because I feel Bill wasn't comfortable with my having such a visible position in the White House and also be his subordinate [at Labor]; that was the first mistake, in agreeing to hold both positions at the same time--I said, "I don't know how I can manage it." The White House staff said, "Look, you'll have a White House car at your disposal, and there'll be no problems about that [getting back and forth]." So I began having it [a White House car]. Then later and later as the consumer program developed, and LBJ was elected president in his own right, the chauffeuring service got worse and worse, and when I complained about the problem of getting back and forth I was told "you can have the Labor Department car." The Labor Department went off duty at seven o'clock, and I never finished my work by then. The thing that really hurt me when I asked to have it [a White House car]--I still just get so sick about it because it's such a petty thing--"No, you don't need it." It was their way of telling me, "Esther, get the hell out of here." I would go out and look for a cab at eleven o'clock at night to take me home when the secretaries [who also worked late] were having White House cars taking them home, and that hurt. Then I thought, "Why don't I tell them the hell with the whole thing?" I was trying to figure out, over and over again, ways of resigning, because I

felt they were telling me they wanted me out, you know, and they were. This is their way, and I wish to hell they'd come clean and said, "Look, sit down, Esther--[let's talk things out]." But these nasty little ways of doing things were really rough on me.

G: Do you think they got more than they bargained for in you?

P: Yes, I think so. I think Califano, in the interview in the Wall Street Journal, said that we didn't want a zealot. I guess maybe I was a zealot, at least in their eyes--but then why didn't they sit down and say, "Esther, [we have to talk.]"? Why wouldn't they talk with me about it and tell me what I was doing wrong? [If I was in fact rocking the boat]. I guess, looking back, I was a difficult woman to deal with because I not only felt strongly about the importance of what I was doing for LBJ but had enough experience to get my viewpoint out in public.

G: Do you see anything else there in those memos that you want to comment on?

P: I think Bill [Wirtz] had his problem also with Califano, don't you?

G: He didn't seem to have the access that other cabinet members had.

P: That's correct. And he'd be the one that would call me and say, "Esther, come on, hang in there."

(Pause while looking over documents)

P: (Laughter) Oh, boy. These do bring back memories. Are these extra copies here?

G: Yes, you may keep these as well.

P: Good. I'll tell you what else I'd love to have. I'd really like somebody to find the book that I did for LBJ when he came back from the [Asian] trip really giving him the full story of the boycotts, because it's the only copy in existence, and it's the best history of the boycott movement. It was a black notebook that I spent a lot of time working on. I said, "LBJ, when you come back you're going to get all kinds of stories about what's happened. This is a version I'd like you to look at." I never got a reaction. Never. Never, never. I'll bet it was that thick [two or three inches]--a black notebook, and I'd love to see it. Could you look that up?

G: Sure. We sure will. I'm glad to know about it. In fact, perhaps if you'll come down, we'll go over that and discuss that.

P: I'd like to do that sometime and see it. Let me put it this way: if this is helpful, I'm glad to do it [to come down to the Library to look over some of the materials involving the consumer program and office]

[End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview II]

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