

INTERVIEWEE: DeVier Pierson

INTERVIEWER: Dorothy McSweeney

DATE: March 27, 1969, Tape III

Mc: This is the third interview with Mr. W. DeVier Pierson. We are in his offices. Today is Thursday, March 27, 1969, and it's about 3:00 in the afternoon. This is Dorothy Pierce McSweeney.

Mr. Pierson, we had concluded our last session discussing Mr. Johnson's sensitivity to criticism and his attention to the polls. In this area, before we leave it, I'd like to ask you if you had any instances where you saw the impact of Mrs. Johnson on Mr. Johnson as far as his relations with people or his dealings in a situation?

P: Yes, my observation would be that Mrs. Johnson was a wife who had great impact on her husband. To some extent, at least, beyond that of just a normal husband and wife relationship. I am sure she was a constant counselor; she was present at times of great stress. I know for example the early morning hours when Senator Kennedy was shot and the following day when the announcement had been made of his death, a lot of the business was conducted in the Johnson bedroom and arrangements made to assist the Kennedy family; and Mrs. Johnson was there all the time. I think anytime she was there and the President was doing somethings, whether they were saying anything to each other, she was always a present influence and a soothing influence.

Any one that talks with her knows that she's a highly intelligent woman, a well organized woman, and I found her to be an exceptionally warm and kind person--but still with great ability and, I think, the capability of being tough when she needed to be tough. I've heard very few people who have had ugly things to say about Mrs. Johnson and

certainly my experience, much briefer than that of many others, was all to the good.

I think she did influence his decisions to a reasonable extent and I think of one example at the ranch at dinner one night. The President had a group of friends and neighbors in to eat and he began to wax expansive on some subject. I've forgotten what the subject was, and Mrs. Johnson at the other end of the table said, "And of course, dear, this is something we won't be talking about in Washington for several weeks." The implication was very clear to the guests that they'd been made privy to a confidential item that really wasn't subject for release yet, and she was cautioning them that they had best keep the confidence. So she was an able and well used counselor.

Mc: To continue on, we're really at the very end of most of my questions, but I wanted to ask you if you had any activities involving preparation for the 1968 campaign. Of course this would be pre-March 31st withdrawal.

P: Yes. I volunteered to try to establish some dialogue through Ted Sorenson with the Kennedy people. Of course the relations were not good there. So when--and I think I've discussed this to some extent earlier--when Ted had come in we had talked a little about 1968. Ted and John Criswell and I had a lunch discussing the forthcoming New Hampshire primary, and Ted was suggesting names of people he thought might be helpful in different sections of the country and indicating a willingness to participate actively in the campaign. Then we had gathered a couple of times, various members of the White House staff. I know we had one meeting in Joe Califano's office, where we talked about setting up working groups on various issues that might assist the Democratic National Committee in getting access to information that

could serve as issues papers during the campaign. And I think it was understood that there would have been a good deal of work on the staff in the speech writing area and the arrangements area for the President having a presidential campaign for an incumbent President is a little different, because he doesn't hit the campaign trail as often. And it's very hard to draw the line between Presidential duties and candidate duties. Likewise from a staff standpoint it would be hard to draw the line between preparing things for a President and preparing them for a candidate. I think we were prepared to blur the line to the extent that it was practical to do so.

Mc: Did you do any traveling in connection with this prior to--?

P: No, I didn't. No, I can't think of any trips that I made on the campaign trail, except a couple of trips out to Oklahoma mainly at the President's request to be helpful to Mike Monroney and to test the political winds for him, but secondarily to see what the national sentiment was in Oklahoma--but nothing very dramatic.

Mc: Did the Democratic Organization appear to be not sufficient at the beginning of 1968?

P: I think at the beginning of 1968 it was far from sufficient. But I wasn't one of those that paid daily attention to that. So I saw only a small piece of their insufficiency, but it would have very clearly been necessary to beef it up a good deal for the campaign.

Mc: Did you feel there was much interest in the political side of the campaign in the White House?

P: Oh, there was great interest--and just an assumption that it was going to happen, that the President would run again and that the thing you would be doing for several months would be working toward his re-election. Oh yes, there was tremendous interest and just the beginning of

of the building of the excitement when he made his decision at the end of March.

Mc: Did Mr. Johnson indicate he had any strong concern for his unpopularity at that time and his public image?

P: He didn't indicate that to me in that context. He commented several times that, you know, "It seems that everything we do is unpopular and we're down in the polls, but we're still going to continue to do the things that we believe are right." It was usually in that context, not from the standpoint of, "Well, I wonder what kind of candidate I'll be." I don't think I ever heard him say anything like that.

Mc: I may have asked you this, but did you have any indication prior to March 31st of what was going to happen?

P: I had none. You can look back now at things he said that no one paid any attention to. He would often say, "Now, if we decide to run this year," or "I'm not sure I'm going to be a candidate, but if I am, so-and-so." You know, everyone I think thought that was just his way of talking and really didn't attach any importance to it at all. As far as any discussions of his decision, I had none.

Mc: Did you have a feeling, thinking back now, this was sort of a part of the Johnson procedure of keeping his options open, that he was not committed to that until the 31st?

P: I don't know that I view it that way. I think whether or not a man runs again for President is a highly personal decision, and of course he kept his options open until the moment that he spoke those words. But as far as it being an example of the Johnson technique of circling an issue and prying information out of lots of people and being mysterious as to his own intent until the last minute, I don't think it's a very good example of that. I think it's a good example of the man who carefully

thought through an enormous personal decision, and I'm sure counseled more than anyone else with Mrs. Johnson as would be natural.

Mc: Did you ever participate in the Tuesday lunches?

P: No, not at all.

Mc: Did you ever do any traveling for Mr. Johnson while you were there at the White House?

P: No, I did no traveling except to make a couple of trips out to the Ranch while he was out there and traveled back and forth with him on those occasions. But I did no independent traveling for him at all.

Mc: You have mentioned in the course of our interviews several--at least one I recall, task force that you became involved in. One was initially prior to your appointment in the White House. Did you participate in others that we haven't discussed?

P: Yes, I worked on putting together the Task Force on Communications Policy, and as to the constitution of its membership, and attended some of its meetings, and was the White House liaison for that task force. I looked at quite a number of the various task force reports and made recommendations on them to the President. I worked very closely with the advisory group appointed to assist Ambassador Roth in making his study of trade policy. Then there were a lot of rather small off-the-record task forces on particular subjects that many of us worked with, and I worked with some of them.

Mc: How did Mr. Johnson receive task force type of information reports?

P: I think he tended to be more concerned about their content than they usually merited. He was very conscious of the fact that whether or not he had ever seen the work product or had had anything to do with putting it together, that when the report was released the paper would say, "Johnson Panel Says So-and-So," or, "LBJ Asks Such-and-Such."

This bothered him to the extent that he was far more concerned about what was in a task force report than I think was really justified. Had he just in some instances said, you know, "Fine men, a lot of things to look at here, and that's what I'll do," he might have saved himself some grief on some of the reports. But he did take a very proprietary attitude toward any of the task forces that were a part of his Administration. So he did give a lot of thought to them.

Mc: Toward the end of his Administration, did you have any feeling that the sort of task force procedure was becoming cumbersome?

P: No, I don't think it's necessarily cumbersome. I think a task force can be a very useful exercise. I think what was difficult for President Johnson was he had set so many task forces in motion before March 31st. Presumably these task forces were designed to provide information to him that then he might implement in another term as President, if he was re-elected.

When he decided not to run, and obviously wasn't going to be there after the end of 1968, he didn't lose interest in these reports, but he had two conflicting emotions. One was that he didn't want a lot of people throwing ideas that he would have nothing to say about and being attributed to him. And, two, he had an honest conviction that he shouldn't paint his successor into a corner on major public policy issues. And he didn't want to put things in motion at the eleventh hour that would come home to roost in the next Administration and that they'd have to deal with. Well, the combination of those concerns led him to have a difficult time with the task forces that were already in motion and just really couldn't be stopped.

But the task force mechanism, itself, is I think one more useful way of cutting across the complicated government that we have now where so much is interdepartmental and requires inputs from various agencies.

Mc: Did this cause any friction to arise between task forces that were in motion--

P: Oh sure, sure. Everyone looks at things through their own blinders, and this was very big to them because they had investments of time, effort and prestige. Of course what they wanted was their work product to be crowned with public accolades. So there was a built-in conflict there, and it did cause some friction, some unhappiness, just some feeling of miffed at being left out of the limelight after a major --but no tragedies I think.

Mc: Do you recall any examples of this?

P: I guess the Task Force on Communications Policy was one example of a report that was not released; the Treasury Department Report on Tax Reform, released only as a staff study and to the Congress sort of in a backdoor method. Those would be two prime last minute examples. I guess there was anti-trust task force that didn't get released. But those would be the major ones I think.

Mc: Do that reach a sort of confrontation stage before Mr. Johnson?

P: No, no, they didn't. No. It was just a question of, will there be a public release with a lot of hoop-la or will it just be submitted to him. In most instances what he elected to do was to provide it to the President-elect's people in the transition process for such use as they desired to make of it, and without any stipulation as to release or anything, which he felt gave them maximum flexibility.

Mc: Could you tell me a little bit about your role and your activities in the activities in the transition process?

P: I had contacts with a number of the Nixon aides on sort of a friendly basis. I knew Bryce Harlow very well. We were both Oklahomans, and Bryce had been helpful during our Administration on a number of matters.

So I had a couple of sessions with him and two or three, I guess, with John Ehrlichman and some of his staff. We talked about some of the legal duties in the White House, really the boiler plate. We talked about the less important things. It is harder to talk about the important things because each Administration has it's own view as to how it's going to be done, so they really spent a lot of time talking to us about trivia and kept their own counsel on the major items.

I did prepare a couple of work papers on things that I thought would be pending in different subject areas, and left it for them. Where they are gathering dust, I do not know.

Mc: Did Mr. Johnson issue any sort of guidelines for operations.

P: Yes, he of course had a fairly elaborate transition machinery with Charlie Murphy as his designated transition agent. They dealt with all the nitty-gritty spaces, security checks, and the long list of items. I didn't play any part in that. Then he issued a general guideline; he made an announcement to the Cabinet; the Bureau of the Budget sent a circular to each of the departments, asking them to evaluate the pending matters before each department and to determine those items which should be acted on and those items which should be deferred. He asked each Cabinet officer to make a very conscious effort to be of assistance to the Cabinet designee. He directed each of us to make certain that we didn't make life any more difficult than we could for the people that would be coming in--to be of every assistance to them.

I was very impressed by the fact that up to the last night--and you know he had a party for the staff the last night, Sunday night, the 19th--that he even that night said, "Now remember, the country can only have one President and everyone owes him all the help that we can give him. So let's don't all go out tomorrow and start immediately talking

about how badly they're handling things. Let's give them every chance to do a good job and be constructive and not destructive," which I think is typical of the Johnson pattern ever since the Eisenhower years.

Mc: How do you mean?

P: He made every effort to be cooperative with Eisenhower. It's the consensus business, and I think he honestly felt--there is a great streak of fundamental grassroots patriotism in this man who tells you, "Don't go out and knock President Nixon. Don't be a Democrat at the expense of giving the new Administration a chance to govern." He had seen so vividly the frustrations of governing that he didn't just want to make it hard for the next guy right off the bat.

Mc: Do you recall what you felt were significant events or incidents relating to this transition process?

P: No single event. I was with him when he talked to Secretary Hickel. I think that was the only one of the new Cabinet officers that I was present for the meeting. But they were all about the same--cordial, tidbits of advice. I don't remember any single significant thing in the transition.

Mc: How would you evaluate the transition?

P: I think it was excellent from the standpoint of the transition machinery--probably the best in our history. From the standpoint of friendliness on each side, I don't know how it could have been better. We were surprised that the new people seemed to be moving so slowly on matters of appointments, designated liaison people to do different things, because we just thought we were going to run out of time. But that was their choice and should be their choice.

We also found that they, as I mentioned, they didn't want to talk about the big policy issues. They wanted to make their own judgments

on them. And you know, I don't have any feeling they thought we were going to brain-wash them or anything, but I think they just believed they could do a better job after January 20th of looking at those.

Mc: Did you feel that as much information on the running of the government was imparted as was sought?

P: There was as much imparted as was sought. They could have sought more, I guess, but transitions I suppose would always be awkward, and this was about as good as any will probably be.

Mc: During the last few months, Mr. Pierson, did you have any activity regarding party politics and campaigning?

P: No. You mean after the election?

Mc: After March 31st.

P: Oh. Oh, I had some contact with the Humphrey people after the convention. Very little contact before the convention, except that some of the Vice President's people were there and were in the Mess at lunch, and we talked casually then. But I played no major role in the campaign at all, except to take the last week off before the election and go out to Oklahoma and try to re-elect Mike Monroney which I profoundly regret I wasn't able to do.

Mc: Did you feel that the White House or Mr. Johnson was able to help Mr. Humphrey? Or did they?

P: No, I'm not sure he was able to help him. I think, you know, that it is quite limited, the kind of help that can be given.

And with the problems that this Administration had, on Viet Nam Specifically--almost entirely really--because certainly the domestic record was a record that any Democrat nominee could very cheerfully run on. So I guess Viet Nam was to some extent an albatross to the Vice President who had to do this very slippery juggling act of deciding

how dovish he could become without alienating another group of votes somewhere else--a very, very hard task. I doubt that the President was helpful to them. He wasn't destructive in any way--and he delivered Texas!

Mc: Did you ever hear Mr. Johnson discuss Mr. Humphrey's campaign or candidacy?

P: Yes, I've heard him discuss it, not at length, and nothing very significant. He invariably wished him well. I think he felt there was some vacillation on Viet Nam, specifically on the bombing halt. And I don't think, incidentally, that the President played any politics in the bombing halt. I think what he would have liked best would have been to have gotten it a lot earlier than he did. But nothing very significant.

Mc: Did you participate in the convention at all?

P: Not at all.

Mc: I just have really one sort of concluding question. I'd like you to sort of recall what you thought was of most concern to Mr. Johnson that you kept either hearing him talk about or being involved in discussions on?

P: President Johnson's greatest concern was helping the American people so that the less fortunate could have more of the good things of life. The programs that he truly loved were those of education and health and poverty. He was very disappointed with the ones that didn't work well, but the general thrust of raising the comfort level of this country and giving people a better life was the thing nearest and dearest of his heart. It was something he had an intense emotional commitment to. That's why the agony of Viet Nam was such a frustration to him, because he knew that the costs of the war were sapping the funds available for the programs which he felt were so important. And he knew that

the war was also sapping the public support that anyone would have to have to be moving these programs on. So his grave concern was to find peace in the context of his belief that our commitment in Viet Nam was the right choice for this nation, and not the wrong one. So, while he grieved that the consequence of that choice was the deferral or the lessening of the support, financial and otherwise, for the programs nearest and dearest to his heart, he believed what he was doing was right. And it was the paradox of that that I think gave Lyndon Johnson the most agony.

Mc: Did Mr. Johnson feel that history would more or less vindicate him?

P: Yes, I'm sure that he did, and does, feel that history will vindicate him and that when Viet Nam comes to a close that if then the neighboring areas--the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia and Japan and the whole perimeter there--remains free and strong economically and friendly to our interests that as the years go by that he'll be absolutely vindicated. I think that is his belief.

Mc: How do you think history will rate Mr. Johnson?

P: I think it will rate him on the basis of how correct that assessment that he's made is. If Viet Nam is settled on a satisfactorily basis--satisfactory in the sense that it comes to an end, first, and second, that it does not flare up again, that there is stability in that area so that men can point back a decade from now, or two or three and say--as is I think the prevailing thought on Korea now--that, "Well, it was a terrible, terrible thing, but it did act within the policy of containment to keep freedom in a certain section." If they'll be able to say that ten or twenty years from now, about that part of South East Asia and our relations with that part of the world are good, then I think history will say, "Lyndon Johnson had a very hard decision to

make, he probably made the right decision, at least we can see the long-term consequences."

And his domestic record will be exceptional. He will be the President who presided over a time of immense social change, change that will be accepted by everyone, and he'll be then rated either a great or very good President.

If there is no satisfactory solution to Viet Nam, and if instead we have a very unsatisfactory peace and it causes an inwardness in this nation, so that our international relationships are more fragile, rather than less, and that is a continuing process, then those who presently have such reservations about Viet Nam will say, "This was a tragic turning point for the United States; it was a decision of Lyndon Johnson." Hence his place in history would be severely blemished on the international side. So I think he really rides now with the question of how it turns out there, and we'll all have to wait and see.

Mc: I have no further questions, Mr. Pierson, is there anything we haven't covered, or you'd like to add to anything we have?

P: No, I think we've covered it all, and I've enjoyed it.

Mc: Thank you very much.

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