INTERVIEW II

DATE: June 20, 1977

INTERVIEWEE: W. R. POAGE

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Mr. Poage's home in Rosslyn, Virginia

Tape 1 of 1

G: Let's begin, Representative Poage, with a meeting I think took place in 1938 with President Roosevelt at the White House, when a number of southern congressmen and senators met with him to discuss aid to cotton farmers. Do you remember that meeting?

P: Yes, I know we had a meeting, but honestly I've forgotten.

G: I think the delegation was headed by "Cotten Ed" [Ellison] Smith.

P: He was then chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, but I frankly don't remember the details of the meeting. I know there was such a meeting, but that's about all I could tell you.

G: Can you shed any other light on the relationship between Lyndon Johnson and Franklin Roosevelt?

P: I don't remember what all we have gone into in the past, but of course Lyndon's association with Roosevelt was very close over a number of years and was the most important factor, I suppose, both in his election and in his advancement in the Congress. Lyndon was elected, as I've seen it, almost solely on his support for Mr. Roosevelt. He was not especially well-known in the district. He'd been up here in Washington. In the early years that he was in Washington he was not

working with the Tenth District; he was working with the Kleberg district, so he didn't have any particular following in the district from which he was elected. But there were several pretty well-known individuals [who] got into the race and were rather critical of the President. Lyndon, on the other hand, got in and was very sympathetic with the President and supportive of the President. I've always felt he won the race on the basis that the Tenth District, at that time, was strong for Roosevelt. Lyndon backed Roosevelt, backed his policies.

Mr. Roosevelt came to Texas just after the election. Lyndon had been in the hospital and had not gone to Washington immediately after the election. Lyndon met him and came back with him to Washington. After he got here he was, of course, a staunch supporter of administration positions in the House. I've always felt that Mr. Roosevelt, in turn, was quite concerned with Lyndon's views and looked upon him as one who could give him information about the Southwest better than most anybody--and would. I think that that relationship existed, and I think it continued to exist.

Of course, Lyndon was an ardent supporter of REA, and I had been somewhat active on behalf of REA. I don't think I was ever as active as he was at the time. I think he took a lead in it. Later he took the lead to transfer all of the TP&L [Texas Power and Light] properties in his district and south to the LCRA [Lower Colorado River Authority].

G: That was quite a battle, wasn't it?

P: Yes, it was. It was quite an undertaking, and he felt [that he had]--and he had--achieved a great deal when he succeeded in doing it.

G: Did you think of him as a populist in those days, when he was battling the power companies?

P: A populist? No, I didn't. I never thought of Lyndon in that respect. We've had some members who I have thought of as populists, but I never really thought Lyndon was a populist. In those days we thought of him as a New Dealer and not the old term of populist, I guess.

G: I guess two young turks in Congress at that time from Texas were Lyndon Johnson and Maury Maverick. You had an opportunity to work with both men. How would you contrast them?

P: Maury was much more of a populist. Maury was not a realist; Lyndon was a realist. Lyndon measured the chances of success, and in my judgment the big thing about Lyndon Johnson was he'd always rather take a part of something, achieve something, than carry on the fight and get all of nothing. Maury, on the other hand, would rather go down in defeat and achieve nothing if he made a record of having made the fight.

G: Do you think it was more a difference in their strategies rather than different positions that they would take? Did they basically agree on legislation?

P: Maury was connected with every extreme movement. Everything that was way-out, Maury was involved in it. Lyndon didn't get involved in near so much of that extremism.

G: I noted that he voted for the minimum wage, I guess in 1938.

P: 1938 was the first minimum wage? I'm not sure.

G: I believe that's [correct]. I may be wrong on the year. Do you recall that?

P: I remember the first minimum wage. I've forgotten whether it was thirty-five cents or fifty cents on hour. It was one or the other.

G: I'll check that. How about public housing? That was an issue then that he supported.

P: Oh, Lyndon supported most--in fact as far as I can recall, he supported all of the Roosevelt proposals. He supported everything that the administration advocated.

G: Did he work with you on any of the farm proposals?

P: Yes.

G: Can you remember any in particular?

P: No, I can't remember just what the issues were at the time. Yes. I know that he was deeply concerned with the farm issues, and, of course, he was concerned particularly with this thing we now call Farmers Home [Administration]. I believe in those days it was called the Farm Security Administration. Those programs that were directed at living conditions on the farm, Lyndon was more interested in those than he was in the economic programs of the farm. But, again, I would repeat that he was a realist enough to know and to recognize and accept the fact that he had to provide an adequate income for farmers before they could enjoy these improved living conditions.

G: There were two areas here I guess, that he was interested in. One was the problem of farm tenancy in the South. Did he work on any

of these reports that were done?

P: Now when you say "on these reports," of course Lyndon was never a member of the Agricultural Committee and had nothing to do with the reports of the committee. We were faced at that time in my district [with these figures:] in my home county, McLennan County, 65 per cent of the farms were operated by tenants, Falls County was 67 per cent, and Bell County was 64 per cent. There were a great many counties where almost two-thirds of the farmers were tenant farmers. That was exactly why Farm Security that I mentioned a few moments ago was developed, to try to help these tenants become home owners. And I think it did a good job. We never put the kind of money into it that the government puts in these programs today, but they got a whole lot more for their money in those days than they do now. And they did help many people buy a farm, many tenants.

G: What was your role in that legislation?

P: Mine? I was a member of the Agriculture Committee from 1940 on. I guess it was 1940 that I went on the Agriculture Committee. Of course, I did have some hand in developing the Farm Security Administration just as a member of the committee, a very junior member of the committee, but I wasn't the leading factor by any means.

G: Do you remember the report on the economic condition of the South?

P: Yes, I sure do.

G: I guess Lowell Mellett worked on that.

P: I guess he worked on it, yes.

G: What can you tell me about that report, the genesis of it and the impact?

P: I can't tell you much about it. There was a great deal of feeling that the report was slanted from the standpoint of liberalism, I guess is the best word to put there. I had a great deal of feeling that was unfairly critical of the South. It didn't take into consideration the problems of the South. It only took into consideration the situation which we all knew was bad. It didn't recognize what was attainable. I think that that report probably had a hurtful rather than a helpful effect.

G: How so?

P: It got people to believing that all of our reforms were being run by a bunch of crackpots who didn't understand our problems, and I think it set us back for some time in getting public support for the very things we needed. We needed public support for things like farm home loans, tenant loans, but of course that report was an attack on the tenant system. I think that most everybody recognized the defects of the tenant system, but you don't just go out and destroy a system that is providing a living for people and offer nothing in its place. The tenant system developed after the Civil War. It was of course an effort to salvage something for the landowners of the South, and an effort to provide some kind of employment for the freedmen.

G: One of the themes that seems to run through that report and other writings of the time was that the South was a colony of the

Northeast in terms of merely producing raw materials for the capital interests supported in the East.

P: Of course there was a great deal of truth in that, in my judgment, but again it was one of those cases where you must ask: "what do you substitute." The South had to have capital. I'm the oldest man in the House today as far as I know; I'm old enough to remember when Brown Brothers of San Antonio were lending British money all over Texas to the ranchers and the big farmers, primarily the cattlemen, and they were getting 14 and 15 per cent for it. Sure it was bad, but what else could we do? You have to have capital somewhere. You don't develop a country without capital. You don't go out there, just a bunch of people without tools.

G: How prevalent was this sort of regionalist thinking in Lyndon Johnson's years in the House?

P: I think it was very prevalent. I think Lyndon came in and I came in to the Congress just about the time that we were beginning to change. Mr. Roosevelt recognized some of the problems which I felt that that report did not recognize. Lyndon recognized problems that I don't think that that report recognized. They recognized that there had to be capital there to carry on agriculture. They recognized that there would never be any industrial development in the South--and it was just beginning forty-two years ago--without big capital investments. Mr. Roosevelt proposed government money and, of course, put lots of government money into circulation. But the point is that somebody's got to put that money in there--either the

government or private industry. Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Johnson were willing to put lots of government money into development, not only of the South but of all parts of the country. And they did put lots of it in; they did break the control that the British and the New England capitalists had had of financing everything.

We used to have to get our money from Boston or from London, and we had to have lots of money. Every fall the Texas banks had to borrow money to move the crop; there wasn't enough capital to move our cotton crop in the fall of the year. Somebody has to put up a lot of money to move a crop of that kind, and the Texas banks borrowed the money in the Northeast, did it every year. Well, we've gotten over all of that now, of course, as we recognize we can finance our own operations. But it's a slow process, and the whole world faces that problem to some degree. Really, it's the basic question of communism, to what extent should the government go? Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Johnson went a whole lot further than lots of people at the time thought they should go, though I think, looking back, that most people will now pretty well accept their ideas.

G: Do you think he retreated somewhat after he was elected to the Senate?

P: Certainly he did. Lyndon came to Washington as an ardent New Dealer, and he wasn't faced, as a Roosevelt spokesman in the House, with the direct problem of financing, of paying the bills. His problem then was to lay out what was needed. But as he got into the Senate, and then later when he became president, he had the obligation of paying

the bills.

G: Do you think this, shall we say, trend toward a more conservative way of thinking was a result of representing a larger, more conservative constituency than he had in the House?

P: No. Because he had a more conservative constituency in Texas than he ever had later on.

G: But I'm talking about the change that took place after he was elected to the Senate in 1948.

P: No. I think that what was really happening when Lyndon went to the Senate was Lyndon had come--I don't like to say under the influence of, but just as he was under the influence of Mr. Roosevelt when he came to Congress, he was under the influence of Mr. Rayburn when he went to the Senate, out of Rayburn's House but into the other body. Johnson and Rayburn worked together splendidly, and I think to the good of the country. I think it was a very helpful arrangement. But Rayburn was a much more cautious man than Mr. Roosevelt, much more, always had been, although he had carried on many of the Roosevelt ideas. When Johnson had the leadership of the Senate put on him very early by Senator Russell, he began, as I see it, to recognize that he had a whole lot more responsibilities than he had recognized in the House. And he met those responsibilities. He was concerned with the ways and means far more than in the House. It hadn't been his obligation to look after those things in the House. It became his obligation, particularly with the leadership in the Senate.

G: In 1940 you had President Roosevelt running for a third term, and

there was a split in the Texas delegation there. Vice President Garner, of course, was opposing it. Do you have any recollections here of that third term issue, the conventions, and Lyndon Johnson's role there?

P: No, I didn't attend conventions in 1940, and I guess I wasn't taking too big a hand in things. No. I don't have any particular recollection of Lyndon's actions there. He of course stayed with the President, but I don't remember any of his statements as to why or anything.

G: He never tried to persuade you to support this or that with regard to the third term?

P: Oh, yes, of course.

G: Did he? Can you recall anything?

P: He never met anyone but what he grabbed you by the arm and looked you in the face and spit in your face and talked a streak at you. Sure he did. Why, he always did.

G: Can you recall any one example of when he used the Johnson "treatment" on you to get you to do something?

P: Well, he tried to make me run for the Senate once against Pappy O'Daniel.

G: Is that right? Was that in 1942?

P: It must have been 1942, yes. No, it wasn't 1942. It was much later than that. It was after Lyndon was in the Senate. It was his first term in the Senate. He wanted O'Daniel beat, and he didn't know just who could do it. One day I was down in Austin, and he came

along in an old sports car that he had and picked me up down there at 6th and Congress and we rode around for two hours. He was rubbing his nose against mine trying to convince me that I ought to make that race for the Senate against O'Daniel. He gave me all of the works, I guess, of how good it would be for me and how bad it would be if I didn't, how I owed it to everybody. But I didn't feel that I was the man to make the race for the Senate. I never have wanted to run for the Senate.

G: He was a hard man to say no to, though.

P: Yes, he was. He was a very hard man to say no to. But that morning he really gave me the works.

G: Was he satisfied with your decision?

P: Oh, no. But he went on, and, of course, I'm sure that he did the same thing with several others.

G: I was going to ask you about the [James] Allred-O'Daniel race in 1942. A lot of the Texas congressmen came back and evidently worked for Allred in that election. Do you recall Lyndon Johnson's role there?

P: Now let's see, when did Lyndon get out of the army? He was still in the army then, wasn't he?

G: I believe by this time he was--

P: When was it that he came home?

G: Let's see, I guess he left in May.

P: He left in January; he left Washington in January, and I thought he was gone.

G: He went to San Francisco, but then wasn't he in and out of Austin

that spring until he went to Australia?

P: I guess he was. I guess he was, but he certainly wasn't there for all of that campaign. That campaign was in July under the old law.

G: So he would have been gone.

P: I don't think Lyndon was even here at the time of the election.

G: Do you recall his World War II experience in Australia? Did he ever talk to you about it?

P: Very little. Lyndon talked to me the night before he joined. Again, he had an old sports car here in Washington, and in December it was cold. I remember we drove out Massachusetts Avenue. He talked to me about what he ought to do and about resigning and going into the military service. And the next day he did.

G: Did you advise him on that?

P: I talked with him about it. I never would say that I advised him.

G: What were his thoughts?

P: He was trying to determine or trying to make up his own mind as to just how this would be taken, whether the public would consider it an act of demagoguery or whether they would consider it an act of patriotism, and what would be his position when he came back, those sort of things. It wasn't really a matter of advising him what he should do, it was a matter of sort of going over just what all was involved.

G: Before that he had, I guess, been the floor leader for the fight to extend the Selective Service law in 1941, which was a very close vote, I think one or two votes.

P: One vote as I recall it.

G: Do you remember his role there?

P: No, I don't remember much about it. I do know that he was active for the extension.

(Interruption)

G: During that period he was also very active in supporting defense programs, building naval defenses and things of this nature. Did you work with him on any of these?

P: I was not on that committee. Just as I said Lyndon was not on the Agriculture Committee, I was never on the Armed Services Committee, or Naval Affairs was what he was on at that time as I recall it. It was before they combined the committees. My views were in line with his. I was in favor of building the defenses. I was in favor of fortifying Guam and those sort of things. Fortifying Guam was not really an important matter, but it was something that became a symbol of your support for or against national defense.

G: Another issue I guess back then before the war was use of PWA funds to support men in shipyards, building naval vessels. Do you recall that as an issue?

P: I do recall that we had some problem about using the PWA funds. I don't recall the details of what happened, though.

G: Did he talk to you about his decision to run for the Senate in 1941 against W. Lee O'Daniel?

P: No, I don't recall that we ever had any conversation on that. Of course, after he was running I must say Lyndon never met you but

what he presented what he wanted done and what he wanted done in Central Texas. I supported Johnson, and I did what I could for him. I believe that's the time he came to Waco in a helicopter. I went out there and my mother went out there. My mother was ninety-eight years old when she died; she wasn't that old at that time, but she was an old lady who was well-known around Waco. Lyndon would tell you what he wanted you to do, but I don't recall him ever discussing whether he was going to run or not. He just announced.

G: What about in 1948? Did you help him then when he ran against Coke Stevenson?

P: Oh, yes. I supported Lyndon. I don't mean that I was ever any big factor in any of those things, but I mean that I was openly for him. After all, I thought he was far the better [candidate]. I liked Coke. I'd served with Coke in the legislature. He was my friend. But I've always felt Coke's people were mistaken when they carried on this big fight. I thought that was a mistake. I think Lyndon won that race. A lot of people don't, don't till this day, but I believe that he won it and won it fairly.

G: When he came to the Senate he was soon in a position to help Texas in many ways in terms of programs. I get the impression that he really made sure that the Texas congressmen got good treatment in terms of the programs that they were interested in, all the way through the White House.

P: Yes, I think so. I've always felt that he did.

G: You've mentioned the close relationship that he had with Speaker Rayburn. Is there anything that you want to add to that?

P: No, I didn't know of their relationship as much as some others, I'm sure. I very rarely attended any of their meetings. I never was a man who did much drinking, and I recognize that most of the afternoon meetings usually involved a good deal more drinking than I could undertake. I just never attended many of them. I have been invited to a number of them and have attended a number, but not any great number, I should say. With no regularity let's put it, as I know some members did.

G: I believe your earlier interview with Joe Frantz was done in 1968. Did you see much of Lyndon Johnson during his retirement in the later years?

P: I didn't see a great deal of him, no. I visited the Ranch several times, a number of times, but that was about the only time I saw Lyndon. He came to Waco on my behalf; it must have been right after I got Burnet and Lampasas Counties in the district. We had a big dinner there at Waco on my behalf, the first meal ever served in the new coliseum at Waco. Lyndon came up to it and spoke, but he didn't stay. He went on back to Austin that night.

No, I didn't see a great deal of him. I did get Lyndon and Lady Bird interested in a pet scheme of mine that I have been interested in for forty or fifty years and still haven't made any progress [on]. But I found out that Lyndon had never been to either Bear Mountain or the Enchanted Rock--they are both right there close

to him--and I got him interested in this parkway through Texas. I say I got him interested in it; I feel that I had a good deal to do with getting him and Lady Bird interested in it, and they did go privately up to the Enchanted Rock.

G: That's in Fredericksburg, isn't it?

P: No, Enchanted Rock is on up in Llano County. The Bear Mountain is out about five miles northwest of Fredericksburg. Then you go on about twenty miles almost straight north from there up into Llano County to the Enchanted Rock. Now, Lyndon is kin to the Mosses. I don't know the exact connection, but I know there is a family tie between the Moss family and the Johnson family and Lyndon bought the Pack Saddle Mountain ranch from the Mosses. The Mosses own the Enchanted Rock, have ever since I can remember. I know they have owned it fifty years. They want to sell it now, incidentally. I wish we could get the state to buy it.

G: When did you interest him in this?

P: Oh, it was just two or three years before his death.

G: Did you go out there with him?

P: No. I did not go with him. As I said, he went up there privately. But I know that was the first time Lyndon had ever been to the Enchanted Rock. He told me it was.

G: Did he give you his reaction to it?

P: Yes, he was very much interested in it. He liked it and thought that it was a worthwhile project. I think that if he were still living the state would buy the rock, or would have already bought

it probably, which they should do in my judgment. They ought to also buy Bear Mountain out there northwest of Fredericksburg. Lyndon had never been to the back of Bear Mountain either. There is a balanced rock back there. I have known it for forty years or longer than that. I knew it when I was in the state legislature; I had been out there. There is a balanced rock back there on the backside of the mountain. There is nothing here to compare it [to]; it's as high as that railing yonder is, I guess. It stands up there and stands on something about this big.

G: I've seen it.

P: You've seen it?

G: Yes. Is there anything else that you would like to add? Any other experiences that you shared with Lyndon Johnson that you are reminded of?

P: Years ago I think that I mentioned when he came to Washington. I never claim to have been of much help to Lyndon, but I think that we were helpful to him right then. I was there about six months before Lyndon came. I was elected in the regular election. [James P.] Buchanan represented the Tenth District at that time. Mr. Buchanan died, and then Lyndon came there in July. Albert Thomas of Houston and I had offices on the fourth floor of the old building just as far from anywhere as you could get, way back toward the Republican Club of today. Lacey Sharp, who later was my secretary for eighteen years or more and then for my Agriculture Committee, came there with Albert. And Clarence Elwell, who was in my

judgment one of the greatest men I have ever known in many respects--he had been the assistant state superintendent of public instruction under Mr. Wood at Austin, and I had gone to school with him at Baylor--I got him up here as my secretary. He was an astute politician, in my judgment.

Albert's family was here but Lacey was unmarried, so was I, and Clarence didn't have his family here at that time, and we would be up there every night discussing things. Lyndon came up, and he got an office just across the hall from us. We used to have these nightly bull sessions.

Lyndon was at that time planning to move his official residence to Travis County. Actually, he didn't own the old place out there, which is in Gillespie County, but his official voting place was Blanco County, in Johnson City. I know we talked him out of it, and I have always thought we did him a good turn. Because no politician forty years ago could afford to run from a big county if he could run from a small one, that is, making a statewide race. Sure, from the standpoint of being congressman from the Tenth District, Austin had the big end of the population, but from the standpoint of running for the United States Senate, which Lyndon was already interested in, we felt then, and I still feel, that he was a much stronger candidate from Blanco County or Gillespie County than from Travis County. Travis County is the poorest county in the state of Texas to run from. There are just too many politicians down there and the public looks upon them as--I mean

to run for a state office. It used to be that Harris County was rather unpopular, but Harris County has got so darn many people now that you can't overlook that fact that it itself is an attraction. But anyhow, I just have always felt that that was one little piece of influence that we probably had on Lyndon Johnson. I think that later he came to feel, I think, after he got in the national picture, [that] obviously a man from the Pedernales meant more than a man from Austin, Texas.

G: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

P: No, I don't know that there is. My memory gets so bad that I don't remember the very things that--

G: I think you have remembered a lot today. I certainly do appreciate your time.

P: You are certainly more than welcome.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

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