INTERVIEW II

DATE: FEBRUARY 1, 1976

INTERVIEWEE: RUTH PROKOP

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Ms. Prokop's home in Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: We're on tape now. Let's start out with Truth in Lending and the difficulties of getting a viewpoint to the President, having to hurdle, let's say, fellow aides.

P: I don't think the problem was any different with respect to Truth in Lending, probably, than it was Truth in Packaging or other consumer legislation. I think it was a basic problem of getting consumer views to the attention of the President. As I mentioned last time, the great difficulty involved the people surrounding the President. If you have a filter between a special assistant, like Esther Peterson, and the President, I don't think that he is going to get the kind of advice that such an appointee should be providing to him. The job performed by Marvin Watson and Jack Valenti was to keep things running smooth for the President. Their jobs did not include allowing the President to be exposed to the maximum number of issues. I think the Truth in Lending was a perfect example of Esther was never able to get past the filters to make a persuasive case to the President. Again, the problem evolved from the early days of the Consumer Office, when she started going through people to get to the President.

G: Right. Did you ever volunteer to take these ideas to the President yourself, or did you suggest alternative routes?

P: Well, I suggested to Esther on several occasions, perhaps indirectly at first but certainly directly at a later point, that she should call the President for an appointment. I don't think she was willing to risk her career, as she saw it, on the advice of a young assistant. On a couple of occasions I probably suggested that we approach the President through Juanita Roberts. Often I would go to Juanita if I felt something needed to be presented to the President. Esther was reluctant to take such a bold approach. That wasn't the way she had initially approached her job, and I think once the filter pattern was established she never felt she could stand up to Jack Valenti or Marvin Watson.

G: Was there sort of a pyramid structure on the staff where you would find a friendly avenue if a major aide like [Joe] Califano or Valenti had the President's ear and also was sympathetic to, in this case, a consumer program, it would be the tendency to go through this particular person?

P: Oh. I think unquestionably.

G: Was that generally the flow . . . ?

P: I think so. I think you were always searching for someone sympathetic to your program. If you were on the outside you looked to the five or six people surrounding the President for the person who could best present your views. You selected the person most sympathetic to your views and who, in turn, would represent those views. Toward the end of my tenure in the Consumer Office Esther was trying to go through Joe Califano to get around Valenti. I know Esther went to Mike Feldman during the early days. It

seemed like it was a constant search for a person who would present her views to the President. In my view, that was the most unfortunate aspect of the consumer program.

G: Did you get the feeling that the top aides were on the lookout for subordinates with ideas like this and offering to sponsor them?

P: Oh, I think so. I think if you had good ideas around the White House, you didn't have too much difficulty in presenting those ideas. The problem was the consumer program was not viewed as a "new" idea and instead was viewed as a trouble spot. Now that consumerism is such a popular issue, it is difficult to understand that opposition and concern expressed by business interests at that time. I think the White House staff was more frightened of business opposition to consumer issues than would be the case today.

G: Was the President isolated?

P: Yes. I often ask myself: is such isolation essential to the survival of a president? You have only so many hours in a day, and you have to have people who sort out things for you. At the same time you have to be able to go beyond a small group to get fresh ideas and to make people feel free that they can propose new ideas. Otherwise, the ideas coming to your desk are no better than the four or five or six men around you, and remember they're working incredible hours. In my view the challenge is how to reach beyond those five or six people and yet allow them to protect your time.

G: There are institutional problems on the one hand and there are personal characteristics on the other.

P: Yes, absolutely. It's the interaction of the two.

G: Do you think that Lyndon Johnson was the type of man who discouraged people bringing

opposing viewpoints to him?

P: No, but I think he set up the structure that in essence did exactly that. In fact, I think President Johnson encouraged opposing views. If you could catch him alone at a party, he was always intrigued with new ideas, or the fact that you had an opposite view. But as the system then existed, I think it was very difficult. Now, let me give you an example of something I participated in during the early years of the Administration. After the 1964 campaign we set up a youth group to meet biweekly or once a month to develop and present position papers on various subjects. The purpose was to bring the concerns of younger persons to the attention of the President. It was a very interesting group of people, mostly under the age of 35. There were two or three papers, one on gun control, that I sent to Juanita Roberts. She sent the papers directly up to the President. There was no problem getting through to him. But in all honesty, I think by late 1967, 1968 the structure in the White House had become more closed and I think it would have been more difficult. The roles of the presidential assistants had become more firmly entrenched. I remember this particular group since we had made a special effort to get young people involved who had not previously supported the President. We involved the president of Radcliffe Club, some young lawyers in Washington, a vice-president of American Express. But, again, there was no difficulty in getting our proposals to the President's attention.

G: Was there ever a concerted effort say to talk to him informally at a White House get-together rather than office hours?

P: Yes, but at least in my experience, those opportunities became less and less possible as

the demands of the White House grew. When he was Vice President, two or three times a year his staff would go out to his house for some social event. You could see him in action or you could talk with him individually. By the time he reached the presidential years, his schedule was too demanding. So I think there was little opportunity, quite frankly, at least for someone in my position. Perhaps for a Cabinet officer it would be a different story.

G: Let's talk briefly about your role in the 1964 campaign.

P: Okay. At that time I was still in the Consumer Office. We were also serving as kind of the central point in the White House for Women's Affairs, probably due to Esther's background on the Women's Commission. But for some reason, on behalf of Esther, I was assigned to work on the 1964 campaign. I worked for a group called Citizens for Johnson-Humphrey, which was designated to obtain the support of Republicans and Independents. At that time--just after the convention in Atlantic City--everyone had a very good notion that defeating Goldwater was not going to be difficult. The question was just how big a landslide could be achieved. Thus more effort was being directed toward Independent and Republican voters than to Democratic voters. With Goldwater as the candidate, it was felt that the President would get all the Democratic votes. Jim Rowe headed up the National Citizens for Johnson-Humphrey organization, and I worked on obtaining the support of what they called the outstanding women of America. I worked with Polly Shackleton, Kay Halle, Ellie Israel, and four or five other women. We put together a list of approximately thirty or thirty-five outstanding women. They endorsed Johnson, wrote letters, and spoke on local television and radio programs. We

brought all of these women to Washington for an all-day meeting about midway through the campaign and arranged a meeting at the White House with the President. President Johnson walked into the Cabinet room when everyone was seated, and he immediately went over and spoke with Jeanne Vanderbilt and also Oveta Culp Hobby, a noted Republican, attending the meeting and supporting Johnson for President. But there was a special warmness that he showed toward Jeanne Vanderbilt which at that time I did not have any background on. At that meeting, the President gave what I thought was one of the most elegant speeches I have ever heard. It was very moving. We had a few self-doubters in the audience that were not so much for Johnson as they were against Goldwater. After the White House meeting, the group attended a reception at Kay Halle's house in Georgetown. Everyone was impressed with his speech and became totally committed to his candidacy.

Years later, I obtained another perspective on the Jeanne Vanderbilt welcome to the White House. It was told to me by Harry McPherson, and I think probably it should be checked with him. The day of the memorial service in Washington for President Johnson, I had lunch with several previous members of the White House Staff at the Cosmos Club. We were just sitting around talking and telling Johnson stories. I happened to mention to Harry this moving speech during the 1964 campaign and described the warmness that Johnson had shown to Jeanne Vanderbilt. At which point Harry told me the other side of that story. At some point during the vice-presidential years, Harry had accompanied Mr. Johnson to a meeting in New York and they had been invited to a cocktail party. They were all in the apartment and Harry said that there were

quite a number of JFK's presidential assistants there. The typical New York types were fawning over the presidential assistants, almost totally ignoring the Vice President. After a while Harry missed him. It seems that the Vice President had been sitting in the library all alone; he had just kind of wandered off from the rest of the crowd. But the one person who left the room to go into the library and to talk with him was Jeanne Vanderbilt. I understood they spent perhaps as much as two hours just talking together. Harry said that the Vice President had really appreciated the fact that Jeanne Vanderbilt leave her own party and come into the library to talk with him. She was later reported to have said that it was incredible how all of the people at the party were trying to obtain all the tidbits about how the White House operates and how they overlooked a really great moment in history: the chance to sit and talk with LBJ for two hours. It's very interesting how these two came together and interplayed.

G: I believe you have another episode regarding the Eleanor Roosevelt bust?

P: Yes. This one's funny. Perhaps it shows a side of the White House that we often miss, which is humor. This might be called black humor, the color black. After Eleanor Roosevelt died Adlai Stevenson was coming down to Washington to present a marble bust of Mrs. Roosevelt. President Johnson was scheduled to accept the marble bust on behalf of the nation. Jim Jones, a White House assistant, and I made all the arrangements for the dedication and wrote Mr. Johnson's remarks accepting the marble bust. However, the day it arrived, Jim and I just looked at each other. It was a dark green marble. Eleanor Roosevelt was many things, but she was not beautiful, and to see her image in dark green marble was not attractive. Both of us knew that if President Johnson ever saw

the bust, he would refuse to attend the presentation.

The presentation must have been rescheduled six or seven times, so it was incumbent upon Jim and I to keep the bust under cover. Someone found in one of the White House coat closets a Western jacket with a zip-out sheep lining, or whatever it is. We used the sheep lining to cover the entire bust. Every morning we would unzip the bust and each evening we would rezip the lining. Since the President had a habit of roaming all over the White House in the evenings, we didn't want him to accidentally find the bust. It became a joke at the White House as to whether we would keep her under wraps long enough to hold the presentation ceremony.

Finally it did come off. Adlai Stevenson came for the presentation, and I must confess President Johnson conducted himself very well. He took one look at the bust and grimaced, caught because the television cameras were there and Adlai Stevenson was in the room. During the entire presentation, the President's face would freeze each time he was forced to look at the bust. After the ceremony, we sent sympathy cards around the White House once the green marble bust of Eleanor left. This type of humor among the staff served as a release from tension.

G: Let's talk about the White House legislative liaison operation and bring in the departments as well. You worked in this capacity, I know.

P: Right. One of the first things I remember is attending a meeting in the White House with congressional liaison types from various Federal agencies. This had to be about 1966 because I had just begun working at HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development]. I will not easily forget that meeting since the President attended. He said,

over and over again--and these remarks have come back to haunt me a little--it was a pep talk about how we had to get Congress to pass his legislative program. But he kept saying, over and over again, how little time we had to get the job done. At the time I really didn't understand the full impact of what he was saying. I kept thinking. "We have lots of time. It's only 1966 and in 1968 you will run again and have four more years." But that's the one thing I remember the President saying repeatedly at that particular meeting. Also he expressed great interest in the caliber of people in the room and their role in promoting his program. I don't think he held meetings, for example, with other assistant secretaries at the various agencies. But, he took a direct interest in his congressional team in each of the agencies. The focus of these meetings--which I believe were held weekly or biweekly--was to discuss the major legislative programs of the administration. The idea was to focus the energies of all the congressional offices on a particular bill or bills that had been deemed a priority by the White House. You might be working with Treasury on debt ceiling although your major responsibility was housing. For example, if the debt ceiling legislation was the legislative priority and twenty-five members were still wrong, then all of the congressional offices would work on the debt ceiling legislation. Often, we were transferred from subject to subject for that reason. It was a very effective use of manpower. Although your prime responsibility was in a specific area, such as HUD, the White House meetings created a team approach to passing all Administrative bills. We never got into foreign affairs; these basically were domestic programs.

At these meetings you reported directly to the White House Legislative office

about the progress achieved by your office on Administrative bills. This covered three different eras of the White House Legislative Office. One was the Henry Hall Wilson era, and then there was some overlap with Larry O'Brien who was around for a while. But the large role, at least in the area of housing, was under the direction of Barefoot Sanders. He was our main contact at the White House on the legislative matters. Simultaneously, the Hardesty operation evolved out of the White House which I described in my earlier interview. The two operations paralleled each other. I began working more so on the Hardesty operation and less on the direct congressional legislative effort. At HUD we put a very high priority on legislation, and we all worked together. The legislative effort was directed by the undersecretary, Robert Wood, who combined the legislative and policy divisions into one team.

G: How were votes obtained?

P: Well, it depended on the issue. First you conducted a headcount of Congress to see what your vote count was and to determine what kind of work you had to do. Then you compiled a list of who was right, wrong, and who was in between. The 89th Congress didn't present many difficulties since most of the time you had a majority of voters willing to support the President's programs. It was mostly a matter of changing a few of the questionables and answering their questions. It became more difficult in the 90th Congress because you did not have the wide majority provided by the previous landslide election. But you visited every member to obtain their support. But we're talking about a bill that was coming to the floor for a vote. Our initial work began when the bill was in a particular committee. Our most important work was done at the committee level, since

the committee members would become your advocates on the floor and they could help you out.

G: I guess the bill would be fashioned to meet the requirements of important committee people?

P: Absolutely. At that time, the legislation would be drafted by the administration and sent to Capitol Hill. Your contacts with committee members would begin when you started drafting the bill. You would avoid provisions that might be offensive to key committee members and/or you incorporated those items that would be favored by Committee members. After sending the legislation to the Hill, you would work with the members on drafting changes. Mostly it involved bringing members around to vote for a particular provision. Unquestionably in some cases there were agreements to take care of problems or to give water and sewer grants. I think it was fairly well accepted that many of the pork-barrel type of congressmen and senators expected something in return, not anything personal, but something to benefit their district. For example, at HUD one of the first questions asked before legislation was sent to the Hill was: what does that senator or congressman have in what was called the pipeline? The pipeline could have been a water and sewer grant or some other kind of community project. As stated before, I saw very little of promising to approve a bad project. If, for example, a community had submitted a bad proposal for a water and sewer grant, the department would rarely approve the project to obtain a favorable vote. The question was: did a particular congressman have a viable project that HUD could move to the top of the line.

G: Would you generally try to get it out of the way before you went to see him, or would

you have it in a position where it was ready to go as soon as he was ready to--

P: You never tried to get it out of the way before you went to him. You just positioned it to move at the appropriate time. Most members knew the name of the game. He knew what projects he had pending at HUD. I observed a couple of real masters at this, congressional types who could convey the *quid pro quo*.

G: Who were they?

P: We had three at HUD that were outstanding. Sid Spector, who had a long background in mental health legislation and in housing for the elderly. He was an excellent congressional liaison officer. He was succeeded by Ed Lashman. Ed, who had worked for Andy Biemiller at AFL-CIO, was another master. Working with both Sid and Ed was Walt Hasty, a good country boy from North Carolina. He was one of the best lobbyists I ever met. He is now Washington lobbyist for the Business Roundtable of America. We had a total of twelve or fourteen people working in Congressional Liaison who would cover different parts of the Hill. One man from Oklahoma covered the Oklahoma delegation and the Southwestern states. Before going to the Hill, the congressional officers knew precisely which projects the congressman had pending in the department. Also, he would have a complete dossier on the members' voting history and relationship with the agency. Had the department fouled up on some issue? Had the member complained to the department? If so, you tried to fix the problem. Or perhaps the member had been favorable impressed by how the department handled a problem. All of this is to say that we had a recorded history of what each member's relationship with the department prior to the personal visits.

G: Did you get many congressmen who were willing to go along with you without having their list of projects considered?

P: Sure. As a matter of fact, toward the end of the Administration, a fewer number of members made such demands.

(Interruption)

G: We're back on.

P: I was going to say that I think you saw congressmen toward the end of the Administration who seemed more concerned with good housing and urban development and less concerned about what they could obtain for their district type. One member on the House Banking and Currency Committee, Henry Reuss, exemplified the new breed. He had an interest in all urban programs, not just the programs that would benefit his district. At that time you were seeing the last vestiges of the very powerful committee chairman leaving Congress. The few that remained had become chairmen of the more important committees, such as Ways and Means and Appropriations.

G: This was not a new system of *quid pro quo* that had just come in. This was something more typical of the older--

P: Exactly. It was typical of the more senior members. Our congressional liaison staff with AFL-CIO experience had been dealing with Congress on a *quid pro quo* basis for years. I had the impression that President Johnson understood and worked quite comfortably inside the *quid pro quo* system, even during his White House days.

G: Was there much of a concern about personal interests? Let's say if such and such a congressman stood to gain himself from a particular project, did you treat that as one of

his district interests or did you avoid it?

P: We avoided it. I believe that the question of personal gain only came up once or twice in my entire experience, and it was avoided. The people I observed in the Johnson Administration had strong ethical beliefs that public funds should not be used for personal gain. It is okay for a congressman to fight for anything to help his district, but the line was drawn at personal gain. To the best of my belief, I never saw one project approved when there was even a hint of personal gain that might result from the project. To us that was an indictable offense and a line that you never crossed.

G: Yes, but it seems that the line is not so clear when you are aiding a major interest in his district that is also a major source of campaign funds.

P: Exactly. At that time I do not believe there was a great concern or even a focus on campaign contributions. Conflicts were more black and white, not gray. You didn't think in terms of "Yes, this project might benefit XYZ Corporation, who is a major contributor." If a congressman, for example, owned certain land or if his company owned the land, that was considered conflict of interest. But I never heard the issue examined in terms of: "If we give this project, it's going to benefit the XYZ Corporations, who in turn are the biggest contributors to [the local congressman]." As a matter of fact, I think there might have been the opposite decision: "That's fine, as long as he doesn't benefit directly." Then it was a direct benefit test.

[Interruption]

G: Okay, we're back on. We were talking about legislation that affected the major interests of congressmen.

P: I don't think at that time we thought in terms of anything but direct personal interest, and I saw that avoided at all costs.

G: Did you come away with the attitude that some of the congressmen were pretty heavy-handed about getting things that would indirectly benefit them through their supporters? Did they push pretty hard on things that were obviously friendly to them?

P: Do you mind restating that so I can be sure . . .

G: Okay. Did you get a feeling after this experience that some of the congressmen were very heavy-handed or at least persistent in getting things for, shall we say, tangential interests to them or interests that were really friendly to them?

P: Yes, I think so.

G: There was an added incentive?

P: I think it was an added incentive. I wouldn't attribute it to every one of them, but quite a high number.

G: But you did notice that the new congressman would have less inclination to do this, is that right?

P: I think so. I don't think you can distinguish only between new and old. I think you had a group that came to Congress in the 1964 landslide who were more issue-oriented.

G: I guess also the programs themselves were controversial enough to generate support and opposition.

P: Yes, I think so.

G: Well, is there anything else?

P: Yes. About a month and a half before President Johnson decided that he would not seek

reelection, I had returned to the White House from HUD to prepare for the upcoming campaign. At that time we were deeply involved in the Hardesty operation and trying to compile a record of the President's legislative accomplishments for the campaign. So the night of March 31, 1968, we had been given an advance copy of his speech on Vietnam. Bob and I were preparing congressional speeches to support the President's speech. Since we had read the speech we debated whether to stop work, go to the White House Mess and watch the speech. We decided to go to the White House Mess.

[Interruption]

P: Of course, once the President began reading the last paragraph which had been added to the speech, we were shocked. We just looked at each other. Also sitting in the White House Mess watching television were a lot of staff people who didn't have any idea about his decision not to run.

After the speech several people went outside and walked around the White House grounds. I have never been so very upset in my life, because across the street all the protesters were singing "We Overcame." There was one protester carrying a sign I'll never forget. The sign was, "Lee Harvey Oswald, where are you when we need you?" We ran over, grabbed the sign, and tossed it in a trash can. A lot was happening that evening, with going in and out of the White House, but all I can remember were the protesters in the park and that sign. None of us could write another speech, so we closed the office and went home.

Then things calmed down and I was assigned to do the history of HUD during the Johnson Administration, which is a large thick book.

G: Administrative history.

P: The administrative history. So that's what I worked on until the very end of the administration.

G: That's one of the thicker ones, as I recall.

P: We had some fascinating experiences. I worked with a historian and we conducted oral interviews with tape recorders. I don't know what happened, but everyone started talking and gossiping about everyone else. When I listened to some of the tapes, I was horrified. I guess for the first time down in the bureaucracy they felt free to speak out. We had one young intern who was claiming, "I've got the copyright to those tapes." I finally obtained the tapes by telling him that "the President of the United States wants these tapes." It was very dangerous, gossip and, in some instances was inaccurate. For example, one person talked about how Secretary Weaver was incompetent. Those comments were wrong and reflected nothing more than a grudge against the Secretary. Nonetheless, it was an interesting project.

G: I presume that the tapes are preserved. I think we have them.

P: I think some of them are.

I'm sorry that we didn't have more time.

G: I think it has worked out very well. Thank you.

(End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II)

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of

RUTH PROKOP

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Ruth Prokop, of San Antonio, Texas, do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of the personal interviews conducted with me on December 4, 1974, and February 1, 1976, in Washington, D.C., and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcripts shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recordings may be made available to those researchers who have access to the transcripts.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcripts and tapes.

(4) Copies of the transcripts and the tape recordings may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Ruth Prokop
Donor

November 13, 2007
Date

Assistant Archivist for Presidential Libraries

12-18-2007
Date