INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: DAN RATHER

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: CBS Offices, Washington, D. C.

Tape 1 of 1

F: I suppose we ought to go back and place you at that point in November, 1963, at which you get involved in things.

R: That's as good a place as any to start, I suppose, although somewhere along the line it might be useful to point out, and maybe at the beginning is the place to do it, that like a lot of people in Texas my age, I think, I grew up with the legend of Lyndon Johnson. I can remember very well in high school, this was before he was a senator, the name Johnson. I can't exactly explain why, because my father by no means was any staunch Democrat. He voted first one way and then the other.

F: Where is this, Smithville?

R: No, this was in Houston Heights. I was born and reared in Houston. Of course, the Heights is kind of an East Texas sort of place. I never have liked that saying too much, but nonetheless I think that's true.

F: It's valid.

R: But the point is that he was recognized as a comer; even then he had the ability to dominate just about any landscape he seemed to

occupy, and that must have been 1946 or 1947. By the time I was in college and began to get really interested in public affairs, like a lot of other people, it certainly wasn't original with me, one just had the vague sense that somehow, someway, someday Lyndon Johnson was going to be president. Now a lot of that was regional pride, provincial pride and that sort of thing, but that's what I grew up with. In those days I didn't really have any opinion of him other than that feeling that he was a comer.

F: You probably in January of 1969 had the same feeling I did, and that is I had never lived [in a world], at least in a thinking world, in which Lyndon Johnson wasn't either running for office or a candidate for office.

R: Exactly. That's a good point. We all, I think, went through a period after he stepped out. I must say I was as surprised as the next fellow, probably more so, astounded might have been the better word for it, at how he drifted so from sight and consciousness, obviously calculatedly so. I just didn't think he had it in him to do that, I must confess. But at any rate I went through that period.

When I was a working reporter after college--I went into the Marine Corps and there was kind of a hiatus period in which I didn't think about much of anything--but when I came back and really started my career as a reporter, I mean I had been a wire service reporter part time in college and thought I knew a few things, but when I came back to Houston and started working for The Houston

Chronicle and then for KTRH radio station, by that time a lot of people outside of Texas were saying that Johnson might make it.

I remember very well the first time I met him, and again you get this from everybody, but it was a little vignette that I've always carried with me about Johnson. It has always told me a great deal about him and Mrs. Johnson. Of course anybody who is going to understand Lyndon has to understand Lady Bird; it was that kind of relationship. But, mind you, I was really green as a reporter in those days, radio reporting. I worked for a radio station, not television. Radio reporting was not nearly what it quickly became a little while later. Very few radio stations actually hustled news on their own, a few but not many.

F: They took it off the ticker.

R: Took it off the ticker. They were really more announcers than they were reporters, and I never was a very good announcer. I aspired to be a reporter.

At any rate, Johnson came, he had his heart attack, convalesced, and he was in a period in which he was trying to re-emerge and re-establish himself as a presidential possibility. This would have been circa 1954 or 1955; I think it was 1955.

F: He had his heart attack in 1955.

R: All right. So it was after that. At any rate, on what we called the "big city wire" there moved not an item [but] just a line that the Senate Majority Leader was going to have a news conference at his ranch and greet members of the press. I saw that, and I talked

our news director, a guy named John Smith, into letting me go up there. This was no small chore, because in his mind it meant really just a day off. I hitchhiked from Houston to Austin with a tape recorder--this was an old wet cell battery tape recorder, nothing like this thing you've got here. I didn't even know where the Johnson Ranch was, much less anything about it. What's his name? A guy who wears a bow tie?

F: Stuart Long.

R: Stuart Long. Stuart Long took me into tow. Somebody said, "Well, Stuart Long might be going out there." He took me out there, just as nice as he could be. Anyway, we went out there. It was a lovely day, and his place even in those days was well done. But we didn't see much of him in the morning. In fact, I didn't see anything of him at all.

F: Was this spring, fall, summer? Do you remember?

R: I don't remember, but I'm inclined to think that it was probably in the fall. I could check it, because every reporter worthy of the name in terms of politics was around there. There were a lot of what to me in those days were big by-liners.

F: Let me stop for a moment. Did you have to have any kind of clearance?

R: No.

F: It was just a whoever comes sort of proposition?

R: That's part of the story. As a matter of fact, I think the fact that I was with Stuart who as you know is a legend in his own time

in Texas journalism [helped]. Mind you, Stuart didn't know me from toad hop; he had just sort of taken me into tow.

F: He had heard of Houston.

(Laughter)

R: But he gave me a ride out there. The morning went by, and there was some light drinking and the swimming pool was there and some people were in swimming, not many, just a lot of visiting. But I had not seen the Senate Majority Leader. Now part of this deal of telling my boss that I could go out there and really get a good story, maybe even an interview, was pretty big stuff for me. In radio we had morning newscasts and noon newscasts and an evening newscast. Well, the noon news was approaching and I had not seen the Majority Leader. I was a little shy, shyer than I should have been, and I kept thinking, "The news conference will start at any time."

Now the point of this story is that a news conference in fact had never been called. It was just that Johnson was going to have some of the boys that he knew fairly well around and some of the Washington press, although it was mostly Texas press there, just to kind of chat. But the wire said a news conference, and green as I was I thought it was going to be a news conference. Anyway, the time was moving on and I had promised to have something for the noon newscast, so I decided I'd better call. Well, there was only one telephone at the Ranch, and it was in the Senator's den. It was an old-style telephone. It wasn't a crank, but it was an upright.

So I got on the phone, and I must confess I didn't ask anybody if I could use the phone. But there were a lot of people going in and out of the house. The Johnsons were very informal then, and I think it is one of the nice things you can say about them that they to a very large degree remained informal.

Anyway, to get on with this long story, I finally got through to the news room and got my boss, and I said something to him along the lines, "Look, I don't exactly know what's going on here. This news conference has not materialized yet. I haven't even seen the Senate Majority Leader. He's around here somewhere, but I haven't really seen him, and I just don't know." He kind of pressed me and said, "What the hell is going on? Why haven't they held it? The thing's supposed to be at eleven o'clock," or something. I said, "Well, I don't know," and then I speculated, which is one of the things that Johnson was death on, a reporter speculating about anything. It was all right for him to speculate, but you dare not speculate. Anyway, I said, "I just don't know. The only thing I can figure is that he may be wanting to hold it later in the day so he gets maximum morning newspaper play." It was already eleven o'clock, and by the time a guy's filed it's one o'clock and the afternoon newspapers or late editions might be able to take the edge off of it." So maybe he wants to wait for the morning newspaper play, and we may not get this thing till two or two-thirty this afternoon. That's the only thing I can figure."

At about that stage this huge figure, huge to me, came right through the room, grabbed the phone out of my hand, and it was the Senator. He got the phone up and said full voice into the phone, "I don't know who this young squirt is and I don't know who you are, but I'm going to tell you that he has got the worst manners I have ever heard of with anybody, and what he has just told you is a goddamn lie from start to finish." Well, Judas Priest, he just slammed the phone down and glared at me and stomped out of the room. Boy, I figured, "holy--" and I left there like a man with his trousers on fire. I walked right out and across the waterfall drive and figured I better hit the road, and I hit it right quick.

But Mrs. Johnson, I once later asked her about this and she didn't remember it, came after me, came up on the road and caught me. She drove up and was very nice. She didn't know my name, didn't know who I was. She said, "I don't know who you are, but you are welcome at our house. As you know, that's just the way Lyndon sometimes is. I'm very sorry about it. Why don't you come on back and have a drink or a glass of punch or something." She talked me into coming back and was very nice about it. The rest of the day I can remember literally moving around trees and bushes and things so I wouldn't have another encounter with him. But the thing that it says to you, for one thing, [is] Mrs. Johnson had a lifetime of doing that for him. The other thing is that he never remembered it. I brought it up to him several times, and he had no recollection of it at all.

Now to get to the major thrust of your question. That really was the only time that I had met Lyndon Johnson, before or after, until I came to Washington in 1964. I covered him from time to time on journalistic events or happenings, for example I was at the 1960 convention, but always in a knot of reporters, and he didn't know my name from Adam's off ox.

F: You weren't in Dallas when they had that famous spitting incident?

R: No, I was not. I was not in Dallas at the spitting incident. I covered him a little in the 1960 campaign in Texas; mind you, I was still in Texas at that time. So the point being that he didn't know me and I didn't really know him before I came to Washington.

Now in Dallas in 1963, by this time I was working for the network, and my area of responsibility was the southern and southwestern states. I headed our bureau in New Orleans. I had before that lived in Dallas when the network had a bureau there, which I opened, but by this time the bureau had moved on to New Orleans. But partly with the memory of that 1960 incident in mind and knowing, as any Texan would, about the political demographics of Dallas, my responsibility was to cover the President Kennedy tour through Texas. I was responsible for setting up our coverage and planning our coverage. As a result of that I laid on a little extra help in Dallas. Goodness knows I didn't have in mind any kind of real trouble, but I thought it was the kind of place where somebody would say something nasty or confront the President.

F: When you lay on special help, what do you do?

R: In every other town, in San Antonio and in Houston and in Fort Worth, we had arranged to have one reporter and one camera crew. In Dallas I'd arranged to have three reporters, including myself.

F: You hadn't done the tour from San Antonio to Houston?

R: No, we had done it on a leapfrog basis. I had advanced the tour, that is gone to each place before they arrived and set up our coverage. But, as a matter of fact, the morning of President Kennedy's assassination I had gone to John Nance Garner's home down in Uvalde. It was the former Vice President's birthday, ninety-sixth or ninety-seventh birthday, I guess. It was that morning. Our idea was that I would go down and cover that story, charter a plane and fly the film back to Dallas and piggyback on our day's coverage in Dallas, which I had set up with this John Nance Garner coverage.

So I flew into Dallas just as the motorcade, I mean the flightcade I guess you would call it, was due over from Fort Worth. I got there maybe a half-hour before they arrived from Fort Worth, and at the time of the assassination I was on the other side of the now famous overpass or trestle just the other side of the School Book Depository waiting for a film drop. This gets more into our business than what you want to know, but someone in the motorcade was going to throw me the film of the motorcade, which I was going to take back to KRLD, which is our local affiliate.

F: You're waiting on the slope.

R: That's right, but on the other side. The motorcade came by, at least a couple of cars came by, and it was obvious to me something was wrong. I had no idea what was wrong. I thought it was the President's limousine, but I couldn't tell for certain. They had taken the wrong turn, for one thing.

F: Were you screened from the book store?

R: I was screened from the book store completely. I was over a hump on the back side of the slope. I really heard nothing and saw nothing except the limousine going by and a sense that there was trouble. I on foot came back over the railroad trestle, and there was a great melee--melee is too strong, but confusion to say the least. Again, it was obvious to me, "Hey, something has happened here." Our station was only four blocks away. So with the thought in mind, you know, whatever has happened here, the best story in the world is not worth a damn unless you can get it out, my first move was to get back to the station and open the lines to New York.

F: This was KRLD?

R: KRLD. I hotfooted it back there and got on the telephone to New York. For the next three weeks, I guess, I didn't see much of any place else. I did not see President Johnson that day at any time. We had coverage at the airport when they left and some other places, but I didn't see him at any time during the day.

F: Did you pretty well finger your staff around Dallas?

R: Yes. We had two other reporters out of our New Orleans bureau, Lou Wood and Nelson Benton, and we were also coordinating with Eddie

Barker's KRLD staff. This is kind of a standard procedure. The only thing we had done was lay on a little bit of extra help just in case of some minor slip-up. It was one of those stories that happened.

F: Did you get much direction out of New York, or were you pretty much left on your own?

R: They were depending on us, particularly in the early going. About the time I got to them on the telephone it was near panic in the news room. It was obvious something had happened. Eddie Barker was out at the dinner auditorium at the Trade Mart. But we were able to get a lot of information in the first few minutes because it hadn't sunk home to anybody what had happened. As a matter of fact I'm proud to say, and it's one of those things if you're a reporter you live for, we broke the story of President Kennedy's death. I had talked to the hospital by telephone literally seconds after they arrived and got through again by telephone. Later the telephones just absolutely were inundated; you couldn't get in or out of there.

F: People just hadn't started calling then?

R: But they hadn't started calling yet. Not many people even knew where he had gone. I talked later to the switchboard, talked to a man who identified himself as a doctor on the staff who had seen the President and talked to a man who identified himself as a priest who was there. There were two Catholic priests there; it was the younger of the two, I think. Then Eddie Barker at the

Trade Mart had the head of the hospital staff, who was there as part of the official greeting party. Anyway, we put it all together, and there just wasn't any doubt the President was dead. I mean they just said flatly he was. Now the announcement wasn't made until later, and frankly I had my neck run out. If I had it to do over again I'm not sure I would, but there are certain things you do as a reporter instinctively. We'd run all the checks. I'd worked police beats before, and we just had it.

But partly as a result of that, I think probably primarily as a result of that coverage that day, the network sent me to Washington. You know, this was a cataclysmic event to say the least, but in fairness I think they also thought they were getting someone who at least knew Lyndon Johnson's background, if not him himself. I'd like to think and would stand on the record that it was more the coverage, the job we did there that day that was responsible for bringing me to Washington, but I'm also realist enough to know that they said, "Look, we've got to have somebody cover this new President. This guy Rather did a good job during the assassination, maybe he knows Johnson." Really, in effect they just said, "Get up to Washington and do it."

I'd been to Washington one time in my life. I came here on a Greyhound bus right after I got out of college.

F: There's always that moment when you either move up or flub it.

R: That's right. I came on, and it was an extremely interesting time for me.

F: You stayed down there for about three weeks?

R: Yes, I stayed there a little over three weeks. Actually I came to Washington in January of 1964. I had gone to the Ranch. President Johnson greeted, I believe it was Mr. Adenauer, or one of the Germans. I think it was Adenauer. I was there briefly at the Ranch at that time, but I was really in the process of getting myself up here to Washington. It was a quick move. My family went to Houston for a while while I got myself settled.

When I came aboard, this is one of the points of going through this long meandering thing, there was no small amount of curiosity on President Johnson's part about who I was and what I was doing. He kept tabs on things. He had an incredible intelligence system, as you no doubt know, the best intelligence system of any politician I've ever run across, before or since.

F: He probably didn't like the idea of a reporter that he couldn't place.

R: I don't know that he didn't like it, but he liked to know about you. He liked to know about things. So the word spread pretty quickly. George Reedy was his press secretary at that time, and Reedy, whom I didn't know at all, [was] a gentle, good man. I made it my point to get to know Reedy obviously and pretty quickly had a seance with President Johnson. This was part of his style of dealing with reporters. He did want to be able to look you in the eye and take your measure head-to-head. This was a very important ingredient to the Johnson style generally in dealing with

people, like many politicians, but I think he did it better than any politician I've ever seen. Any time he walked into a room, whether there was one person in there or twenty, you could almost see his mental computer go off, "Who is there in this room that I don't know?" [He] kind of put, at least mentally, his nose to the air like a coyote and sniffed out your loyalties or your inclination. Now that was what he was doing in this session shortly after I got here. The session was set up and I came in, and I will say that I was impressed. There wasn't anybody else in the room; there was the President and me.

F: How did this session come about? Did you ask or did they send?

R: No, they sent, and it was pretty quickly after I got here. As I say, I had met Reedy and talked to Reedy a time or two, and he said, "I'd like for you to meet the President." It was shortly after that, and they sent [for me]. There were other people in and out of the room. Bill Moyers was in and out during the time. Moyers, I didn't know. And there were one or two other people I can't remember. Reedy came in and made the introduction but then faded. It wasn't a long session, not long by what later got to be the Johnson standards for reporters, on the order of thirty, thirty-five minutes.

I remember he was a great one to look you in the eye. He'd drill you in the eye. He wanted to know something about the background and how I'd got there. He played very heavily on the fact that I was a Texan. He said, "It's nice to have a Texan around.

You can understand a few of the things in my mind." It was a fairly hard sell session, I wouldn't say super sell as Lyndon Johnson's sessions went, but it was fairly hard sell. It was along the lines, "If there's anything I can do for you, why, you let me know. I like to know about things, and I hope to be seeing more of you." He asked me what kind of family I had and had I bought a house, recommended that I buy a house, said investment in real estate in Washington is a good investment. I didn't take that advice, and I wish I had. It later cost me a lot of money. It was that kind of session.

From then on there were times later, it wasn't much later on, when, again generally head-to-head, [he would confront me]. He didn't often do it through intermediaries. He said to me once directly, "Damn, Rather, of all people I'd think you'd understand." It's subjective, but I think he came to believe that maybe I was particularly--I don't want to say treasonous because he didn't think in those terms, but he got particularly angry with me because he felt, "Well, I could understand if some fellow who went to Harvard or even Michigan doesn't understand what I'm doing and how I'm doing it, but what the hell! This fellow grew up in this basically same area I did, and he just isn't trying to understand." My relations with him were never I don't think really bitter. He'd blowtorch me from time to time, as he did a lot of people.

F: Did you ever get that cold treatment?

R: Yes, I got the cold treatment. There was one long period in there at a very important time for me that the cold treatment, from his point of view, came very close to being effective, and for me almost catastrophically close to being effective. I was here basically in 1964. It was a campaign year; it was a pell-mell year; it was a hell of a time to break in--a new president, an election year, and, God, we were on the road all the time. I must say I didn't understand much about what was going on, and I didn't do a very good job. If it hadn't been a campaign year I probably wouldn't have done as good a job as I did, having said it wasn't very good. But a campaign is something that's understood.

F: You just have to kind of learn your mechanics on the road.

R: Oh, definitely. But there was a period in there where he was playing freeze out.

F: What brought it on, do you know?

R: I don't know. It was some of the election coverage. This was early on. It was pre-convention coverage, I remember that, along about April or May, I guess. But it was a piece or a series of pieces he didn't like, and he expressed himself about it. He said words to the effect, if not directly, "What you're doing is you're up here, you read The New York Times and The Washington Post, and all of a sudden you think that's the fad. What you ought to do is be yourself and do it your own way."

But I went through a period. There was a news conference in which he did not recognize me. I remember this very well. Now,

keep in mind that being recognized at news conferences for the representatives of the major wire services and the networks has been a foregone conclusion, was during President Kennedy's news conferences, and for that matter during President Eisenhower's. There was sort of a list that they run down to make sure they recognize a representative from each of the major ones. We went to the news conference, and it was a news conference over at the State Department auditorium. The President had not yet started using other places for television news conferences. Boy, I stood up--you know how the game is played, you jump up and down--and it seemed to me that no less than a dozen times he looked right straight at me, made a point of looking at me, and then recognized somebody else, as if to say, "Yes, I see you, but I'm not going to recognize you. I'm going to move on."

In my own mind at that time I thought that was pretty serious. It could be. I mean, obviously if you don't get recognized the network begins to think, "What is it with this guy?"

F: I presume your network executives watch those evening telecasts the same way that Johnson watched them.

R: Yes, sure they do. I don't mean to be arrogant about it, but now time has moved on and I could very easily withstand that sort of thing. But I was new on the run and trying to make my way, and it was fairly serious.

I went directly from that news conference to the White House, and I was mad! I asked for a session with him, and Reedy said no,

that that couldn't be worked out. I said, "Then I want to see Valenti." I went in to see Jack Valenti, whom I had not known well but I had a speaking acquaintance with from Houston. Jack handled it very well. He said he didn't think that I was right, that, yes, the President was not all that happy with a lot of things I'd been doing and he didn't understand why I was doing some things, but he, Jack, thought it was a case that President Johnson didn't see as well as most people thought he could see; that because it was television he was trying to operate without his glasses and he could not in fact see more than about ten or twelve feet in front of his face; and that with some of the older hands he could undoubtedly recognize them just by the way they stood or a gesture or something. But that really, as Valenti described it, he'd be out looking into a void out there of just shadowy figures moving in a large room, which is a thought that hadn't occured to me.

I didn't believe it at the time. I later came to believe he may have been right about that. I know that President Johnson didn't see all that well. It was in that period when President Johnson was very concerned about his television appearance. He never got it right. He tried all kinds of things. Jack was in fact responsible for helping him work out his television apperances. But Jack said, "I'll check on it, and I'll let you know." Then Jack began to play the Lyndon Johnson game. Jack said, "Dan, I'll pass the word that you're one of us." I said, "What a minute, Jack, I'm not talking about saying that I'm one of you. I'm saying that

what's fair is fair, that this is unfair. This is a hit below the belt if it's calculated and if he's doing it on purpose." Jack said, "I'll get back to you." He never got back to me.

Now what the facts are, who knows? But looking back on it I think this is the case: I don't think he purposely avoided me. I think if he could have seen that far, he might have, but it was one of those accidental things. But knowing what was in my mind, at least Jack decided, and I suspect the President decided himself, "Let's just leave it be and let him worry about it for a little while." And I did worry about it. "Make him check his hole card."

F: Did you ever get the feeling that he was trying to take you in?

R: Oh, yes, he'd try to take you in any number of times. On the opposite side of that, there were several periods in which there was heavy courtship by the President and he was overly nice, if anything. He didn't always remember my wife's name, but he did most of the time. He was very good about it. He really was amazing, I must say, with names. I don't mean that in a critical way. He couldn't always pop a name out, but he went through a period in which he made a point of saying, "How's Jean?" and that sort of thing.

F: And got Jean's vote.

R: I can't say he got her vote, but she always thought very highly of him.

There were heavy courtship periods, and he would try to take you in. Let's think of a specific example of that. He went to

Houston once to tour the NASA facility there. He hadn't spoken to me for weeks. But he stepped onto that NASA thing, and the local television cameras were there, and he made a point of coming over. He didn't put his arm around me, but he was obviously speaking to me. He said, "Dan, you've made quite a reputation for yourself here." One could say, well, he was being nice to me, which he was, but it wasn't hurting him either. Then the rest of the day, from time to time, he'd give me a pretty heavy sell about how he was personally responsible for having that NASA facility in there; and that although he was responsible to the whole nation he hadn't forgotten about his responsibilities to Texas; how the final decision had been between Boston and Houston and he'd had to go for Houston naturally. It was pretty heavy sell on that.

F: Before we leave that, did you ever have any insights as to whether it was he or whether it was Jack Kennedy's paying off Albert Thomas?

R: I think it was some of both, and if I had to vote I'd vote it was more the latter than the former, that is, that Albert Thomas was a very powerful man. The combination of factors. What I'm trying to say is the Albert Thomas thing alone Kennedy perhaps could have gone against, but with Johnson in there selling hard and the Thomas connection it's hard to see how President Kennedy could have gone any other way. I also think that Houston was the best place for it. For weather and a lot of other reasons I think it probably was the best place for it. But he'd try to take you in that way.

As you must know and probably have reams on such things, he also was very shrewd. I remember once, he had the operation for the polyp on his vocal chords out at the hospital here. He was very worried about that. Before that operation cancer was obviously on his mind. He never said the word cancer, but he let you know in a hundred ways. Now a lot of people said that he was self pitying and trying to get pity for himself, and there may have been an element of that. But my own opinion clearly labelled is that he was genuinely worried about it. Part of that is since then I've seen other people, such as Walter Cronkite, with a similar kind of problem go through the same thing.

But the point is, after the operation he was very anxious to show the world that he was all right, that it wasn't cancerous, it wasn't malignant, it was a minor operation and he was very much in control. The technique for doing that was to invite the three network correspondents, Ray Scherer with NBC, Frank Reynolds of ABC, and myself up to his room. It was one of those memorable scenes. He was still in a convalescent period. He had his pajamas and robe on, and we had lunch. The whole idea was that he would be seen with us; we would be able to pool the report, of course, afterward and get the word out that [he was fine].

F: You didn't bring any cameras?

R: No. There were some cameras brought in either before or later, but not then. We just sat and talked. The whole idea was that

you just go through a whole luncheon with him and see he was perfectly all right.

It was kind of funny in a way, in that the two Filipino White House servants brought in melon balls. These were melon balls made from melons. It was obviously the doctor's orders. The President, at first very politely and not making a scene of it, just said, "Take those away and bring me something else." They went out and came back and brought the melon balls back and set them in front of him. He finally got very naughty about it and said, "I don't want those blankety-blank melon balls. Get me something else." Mrs. Johnson was embarrassed about that. Luci was there, and she was embarrassed because she had young Pat. They weren't married, or maybe they just had been married, but anyway they were kind of embarrassed about it. The point being that after that session was over--Ray Scherer's birthday was that particular day. Scherer was my NBC competition. Ray had the reputation of being an admirer of President Johnson's. I won't pass judgment on whether I think that's true or not, but it's a fact he had that reputation. Sometimes a reputation is undeserved, but he had that reputation. It was no secret that President Johnson liked Ray. So the President gave Scherer a pair of pajamas, a very nice thing to do and a birthday present.

When we started to leave the President stood at the doorway, he had his robe and his pajamas on as I say, and he shook hands first with Ray and Ray said, "Thank you very much for the present. That was a lovely thing to do." They had a little conversation, and the

President was very friendly with him. Then Reynolds, I think, was the next guy, and the President shook hands with him and said something to him. Then he came to me, and he shook hands with me. I think he might have sensed that maybe I was a little jealous about the thing with Scherer, which I wasn't, but he kept me longer. I remember he was shaking hands with his right hand. With his left hand he put his finger up in the air and said, "You know, you keep your nose clean and go to church regularly and be a good boy, and on your birthday you may get a pair of pajamas." He smiled just a little, but I got the message. It was very Johnsonesque to do that. That's the sort of thing that he could pull off very well.

F: Did you ever get the pajamas?

R: No, never got the pajamas. He was very nice to me at other times in other ways. He wasn't always heavy-handed. The thing that as a reporter you always appreciated about him was, and there was plenty that you didn't appreciate, that he knew what you were doing. When he bitched, when he made a complaint, it might be the most outrageous complaint going, but there wasn't any doubt in your mind that he had seen it. He knew what you were doing.

F: He wasn't taking secondhand reports.

R: He wasn't taking secondhand reports, and you knew that he knew exactly what had been said and done.

F: Did it give you any particular feeling when you're making that evening telecast to know that the man you're talking about is watching you?

R: Sure it did. I'll tell you the biggest thing it did is it made you redouble your efforts to make sure you were right and that you were saying precisely what you wanted to say.

F: You never were offhand about anything?

R: No.

F: Did you write your own copy?

R: I did. Sometimes you don't write it; sometimes the time frame is such that you just have to talk it, but I do my own stuff. It did do that. It forced you not to be sloppy. I'll tell you something. I got to the White House a lot earlier those days than I do now. I can't say that I stayed later, because it's always a late run. One of the reasons is that you would say to yourself, "You just can't afford to play it loose. You'd better get there a little early and poke around a little and read a little because you've got to be on the money." The one thing you couldn't afford to be wrong about was a fact, because he'd hit you over the head with that for months, if you were wrong about even a date or something. So it made you think about it.

In some ways I suppose it was counterproductive for him though. This is not something that I would have admitted at the time because I wasn't even sure it was true, and I'm still not certain if it's true, we are in a gray area here, but I think there was an element, and I'd have to confess with myself there was an element of because he was watching you had to watch yourself, and sometimes you failed to protect against it, of wanting to showboat a little. You know,

if you knew he was watching you'd just say, "Dan, he has been pretty nasty lately," and so a kind of a gig phrase.

I'll give you an example: once he was on the Ranch down in Texas, and he hadn't been seen for days. The word was out that he was mad about something. I'm not even sure we knew what it was. But he hadn't held a news conference in a while, for what we thought then was a long time, by current day standards it wouldn't have been a long time at all. But he was in a bad phase of the moon, it was pretty obvious he was. I talked to a low level secretary and one or two other people who had been out at the Ranch, low level people who said, "He's just as mean as some bear with a toothache out there." So I wrote a piece and did a piece which reflected that and said, "He's holed up here on the Ranch, sulking like some wounded bear." I remember looking at that phrase "like a wounded bear" and saying, "Well, that's a little stronger than I ought to go, but what the hell, he'll probably see it and it might be just enough to--"

F: Flush him out?

R: Flush him out of there. Well, it didn't flush him out, but the newscast hadn't been on for two minutes when Tom Johnson was on the phone saying, "The President has been trying to reach you. What he's concerned about is this 'wounded bear' business." So it did have a counterproductive side to it. But I don't like to get philosophical about such things.

F: Did the President call you with any frequency?

R: Yes, it went in spasms. I really think that the numbers of times that he called people have been overstated to a fair degree. My own experience was that over the period of his presidency he called personally to complain about something or to directly compliment you about something on the order of maybe twelve or fifteen times. Now you can say that's a lot. And again, contrasted to the Nixon period, but that's better than five years. That's not all that much. The myth has grown up, and I think it is a myth, that he was just on the phone constantly with reporters. That was not my experience, and I don't think it was the experience of other reporters. It also got to be a kind of a mark of, "Well, you must be doing something, it's getting noticed anyway. The President's calling."

F: Kind of a certification badge.

R: That's right. As is the case, you've probably seen it yourself, well, with Mickey Mantle's homerun that almost went out of the Yankee Stadium. You can probably find a million people who claim to have been there, when in fact there were probably eighteen or twenty thousand people there.

F: And within a hundred feet.

R: That's right. Or seeing Tunney beat Dempsey, a whole lot more people claim to be there than in fact were there. I don't think there was that much calling around. He frequently would use Tom Johnson or Bill Moyers or George Reedy to express his discontent. Now having said to you that he wasn't--he'd tell you head-to-head. But as far as picking up the telephone and calling you or that sort

of thing, as I've outlined, he did no small amount of that, and the fact that he was president and had the time and took the time to do it was indeed remarkable. But I don't think he did quite as much of it as is sometimes claimed.

F: Did he try to play one network off against another?

R: You bet. He tried every trick known, and he knew them all. He'd try to play one network off against another; he'd try to play NBC off against CBS or ABC, one correspondent off against another; he'd try to split correspondents of the same network.. My colleague Bob Pierpont, who was there then and is now with me at the White House, they'd make an effort to split you off, to be nice to one and give the other the back of the hand in hopes of getting a little better deal.

But I'll tell you one thing that he was not bad about and I always appreciated and most other reporters I think did, generally speaking, having said what I just said to you, he did not play favorites. This is to say that the Kennedy Administration--I can't say President Kennedy himself although I think he personally was involved, but I know that Pierre Salinger and Ted Sorenson and some others were involved--would play outright favorites; that is, they would call in reporter A and say, "Okay, we're going to give you this story," a pretty good story, an appointment to a cabinet position, "and give you six hour lead time." They'd give that reporter a six hour lead time, and they would do this over an extended period

of time, six months or a year, with a favorite reporter, and expect to get in return [favorable coverage].

Now President Johnson rarely did that. I think he may have done a little of it. His style, and we're dealing now with a nuance but I think it's a very important one, a subtle difference but an important one, was that he would try it on a short-term basis only. It didn't run six months or a year. And I never knew him with working reporters, White House regulars, to try to consistently lay off really good stories on one reporter. Now, he would try to help columnists, realizing they had a little different role to play he would try to give them some little tidbit. He was very shrewd about that. He'd know the difference between what a column writer needed and what a working day reporter needed. I'm not sure I've explained this fully, but perhaps you got the essence of it. But in terms of outright playing favorites, he was I don't think nearly as bad as what I gather President Kennedy was, and certainly not as bad as President Nixon's group is. We don't see that much of President Nixon, as you know.

To give him his due, I think it was because he was very much aware of the power he had over a reporter. Sometimes he overestimated it, but what I'm trying to say is that he wanted to touch you up but he didn't want to kill you. He wanted to make you heel, but he didn't want to get you fired or run off. There may have been one or two exceptions there, but I can't think of any. I think a good example is that there was a person with NBC with whom he had a long

personal relationship going back quite a few years, predating even his vice presidential time. I fully expected to get beat by that person on maybe two or three stories a year. I would think that would be very natural, somebody that sort of grew up with him, a workaday reporter. And there wasn't a single time over the five year period that that reporter beat me on any story. You can say, okay, part of that's luck and part of it may be that that reporter wasn't as smart as the reporter should have been, but I think it had more to do with he had a sense of fairness about him which we, and I include myself in this, may not have given him credit for.

F: May I ask, was this a male reporter?

R: No. There's no sense in fencing around, it was Nancy. I don't like to deal in personalities, but that's who it was.

F: Who might have certain attributes--

R: That's right, she does. At the time I went to London after the first year, at the end of 1964 I went to London and was our bureau chief there and later went to Asia before coming back, there was a story in Time magazine, which was a bullshit story from the word go as far as I know, which intimated pretty strongly that the reason I was leaving was because the President had a liking for Nancy and frequently did things for her. Well, the story didn't hold water because frankly she'd never beaten us on a story. Now what he would do, it's true, [is] that on public occasions such as an inauguration or convention if Nancy were standing with a group of reporters he would go straight to Nancy. But there was an easy way around that.

You just simply got your microphone right where she was. And those were not occasions of substance. You know, "How's the weather, Mr. President?" "How do you feel?" "I feel great." What we're talking about is cabinet appointments, trips, something that would make an item for you.

F: Was there a strict line of demarcation between the East and West Wing coverage? Did you ever have any female coverage.

R: No, I've covered Mrs. Johnson a great deal of the time. In fact, the basic responsibility for covering the East Wing was mine. I could ask for help and frequently did, but I covered a good deal over there. Mrs. Johnson was beautiful to work with. I just don't think you'll find a reporter who had any trouble with Mrs. Johnson.

F: Did press procedures change any as Vietnam heated up and the President got more sensitive on that issue. Or did you just pretty well do the same job?

R: No. I've heard other reporters say that they thought there was a difference. In my own experience, not so. I don't see any real difference. What's the test? The access to the President didn't change. I had as good access to him at the end when it was his bitter stage as I'd had in the beginning. I didn't see any difference in access. I didn't see any difference in how he treated me. He'd raise hell one day and be complimentary three days later. I didn't see any difference with that. Frankly, I just didn't see any difference. Now one of the reasons could be, again, he was in the know. He was very much aware that I had been to Vietnam and

spent nine months there. He was very much aware of that, so it may well have been that because of that he felt, well, all right, at least the guy has been there and he has seen it.

It doesn't mean he wouldn't try to take you. I have a vivid memory of a period when I first came back, I must say it was not the President himself although I always suspected that he was behind it, Bill Moyers just absolutely insisted that I go down and get a briefing from Professor Rostow. I frankly didn't want to do it. I'd had some dealings with Rostow before, and I think it's fair to say that the chemistry between us just wasn't good. It probably was as much my fault as his, but it just never was very good, it just wasn't there. I didn't want to go, but I remember that Moyers insisted that I go down and have this briefing with Rostow. I went down in the basement in his operation there and he gave me what still to this day stands as one of the most incredible briefings I've ever had, incredible to my mind because not only was it wrong, but it was to my own personal knowledge wrong about what was going on on the ground in Vietnam in an area. I was just back, no more than a month, from the area.

F: Did you get the idea that Rostow's information was in a sense insulated and bookish, or that he had just had it fixed?

R: Some of both. And the third factor is I think he thought--there's no other kind way to say it, I think he was arrogant enough to think he could fool me. My impression was, and again maybe I'm wrong but I don't think so, Rostow had a fix, and by this time he was so deeply

into it that he couldn't afford to believe anything else unless he didn't believe it.

Secondly, I think they got an incredibly bad flow of information. I have yet to sort out in my own mind why that was true, but their information was just in so many ways one hundred and eighty degrees opposite from what I knew to be the facts. An example: Rostow in this briefing was talking about that everyone had said that armor would not work along the Cambodian border. There were certain areas along the Cambodian border; it's reminiscent of some of the things happening now. The border was not all that clearly defined. There were a lot of operations that went across the border, and even when they knew where the border was they'd go across. The North Vietnamese were playing their games there, too. But the armor was terrible, APC's and tanks. They did try to use them, and they'd bog down and they were sitting ducks. It was just Bernard Fall all over again in some very important ways. Armor was not built to be used in that kind of situation. There were some places in the highlands, sure, where it could be used, some places it could be used as just sort of mobile artillery, but not armor as armor tactics were practiced in World War II, which is what they were trying to do.

Now Rostow in his briefing was telling me how well armor was working up around the border. Number one, I think he believed that. I think his information was that it was working very well. Well, it was not working well.

F: Is this army intelligence that's feeding it wrong? I've wondered about this thing. Is there a subconscious feeling? Can you put a finger on what happened?

R: It was all of it. Basically it was a failure of military intelligence. Part of it was conspiratorial, I suppose, the Joint Chiefs of Staff wanting to make themselves look good and each company commander wanting to make himself look good. But I think basically here's the difference, this is harsh but I happen to believe it and it's also important: in my whole time in Vietnam I never had anybody below field grade rank, which is to say major and below, never had anybody lie to me, consciously mislead me or give me basically bum dope. Captains, majors, especially first lieutenants, second lieutenants, warrant officers, enlisted men, they'd tell you. Now always you talk to flag rank people and they say, "Well, they can tell you what's going on in a specific area, but we have the broad picture." I never trusted that. I still don't.

To answer your question: I think the problem was that people who were field grade and above in Vietnam didn't know themselves what was going on. You have a self-perpetuating system of, "Look, you've got to have this report in," and you write up what's going to make you look good because you want to look good, and you're at a point where you know there's a great difference as to whether you make it from lieutenant colonel to colonel. There's certainly a hell of a difference when you make it from colonel into flag rank, and even in flag rank there's a difference if you've got two

stars or three--one to two is probably a better one. It was in that area.

A lot of it had to do with some things you simply couldn't find out. Never have I been in a place where the truth was harder to come by than Vietnam. Questions would go down the chain of command, and you'd get down to the work end and some poor bastard just saying, "Christ, I simply don't know and I don't know how to find out." But the pressure is on him to come up with some answer, and he'll pump it back up the way. I often thought, and I once suggested this and in my offhand way I didn't get very far, the President would have been a whole lot better off if once a week, certainly once a month, they'd have loaded up a plane load of platoon leaders and sergeants and flown them right back to the White House and said, "Okay." Johnson loved to do this sort of thing in other things. You know, "By God, here's the President of the United States. Now tell him what the hell's going on."

But all I can say--we've wandered far afield--is [after] that briefing with Rostow I came out of there staggered. I remember I talked to my wife about it and said, "If he believes that, and I think he does, God Almighty, we're in trouble." I didn't say that in any cynical way. You want the President to do well, you want your country to do well, you want the thing to go well. I have to believe that it was just layer after layer.

But he [Johnson] made efforts. Reedy's book on The Twilight of the Presidency, I think, is a superb book because I think he

outlines his problem. Johnson tried as hard as anybody to keep himself from being isolated, but particularly on the war near the end it was just inevitable once the basic flow of wrong information sort of had a set to it and got in. I blame Rostow to no small degree. Perhaps I'm overly harsh on him. He had a heavy burden, and I don't underestimate that burden at all.

F: How do you turn a current around?

R: That's it. He did the best he could. One of the ways you turn the current around is you try something new, and President Johnson stuck with the same people an awfully long time.

F: Yes. It's not my job to editorialize, but I've often thought he made a mistake along about 1966 by not firing the whole bunch, getting a new team, just for the fresh air, without denigrating anybody.

R: That's exactly right. All of these were well-intentioned men. I don't buy the Halberstam thesis. I have a lot of argument with that book. There are a lot of things in that book which to my own personal knowledge are wrong. You know, good and decent men all, all trying to do their job. But when the history of this administration is written with a little more perspective than it has now, I think a basic mistake in judgment on President Johnson's part was not bringing in his own advisers. One could well understand he had to hold the country together, didn't want to drive any divisions. There had to be a decent interval go through there, but

you see he wound up [sticking] an awfully long time with Rusk and McNamara, Bundy and Rostow, long past what he should have.

F: I think Clark Clifford is a good example of that.

R: Exactly.

F: He might not have been intellectually in the same league with McNamara, but he could come in and give a new examination.

R: The other thing about these fellows, you know, is that quote which you probably have somewhere. President Johnson said at least once in my presence, and I think twice, that Sam Rayburn business about President Johnson saying when he was vice president how impressed he was with McNamara particularly, and Speaker Rayburn saying, "That may be true"--this is paraphrased--"but I'd feel a lot better about it if some of them had at least run for county sheriff." None of these people had ever run for elective office, and I think there's a great difference. This administration suffers some of the same thing. But he stuck for a long time. Rusk was a special case. I think Rusk has suffered some injustices, in that I never had the feeling that Rusk was the true believer that somehow he has been painted. But he was very much, "Look, once the course is set, I'll stick with it."

One of the things I promised myself I'd say to you [is] I think he [President Johnson] had an extraordinary capable group of press secretaries. Reedy, Moyers and Christian, all three, each was a completely different type fellow, but damned good at what they did, very good.

F: How would you compare them?

R: The three? Reedy was too nice. Having said I think he was great, I'm being critical now. Reedy, if anything, was too nice, and he was awestruck about the presidency--I'm not sure about the President himself, although I suspect there was some of that in it, too. But he was intellectual, in the best sense of that word, and professional, not quite aggressive enough. But the thing you appreciated about Reedy, I don't know of a single instance in which Reedy lied to me, which is the most important thing. He is an awfully nice man, probably too nice for his good and too nice to be a press secretary. And Reedy didn't know a lot about what was going on; if so, he hid it well. But he was awfully good. When he didn't know, he'd tell you he didn't know. He didn't always say "I don't know," but he'd let you know that he didn't know. But too often you'd go to him when you had to know, and he just didn't know.

Moyers was a reporter's dream in a lot of ways, but after a honeymoon period it got to be pretty difficult for me to work with Bill, in that I couldn't always mark the line when it was Bill talking and when it was the President. Bill had been in the decision-making process. He was still in the decision-making process in a way that Reedy never had been, and you sometimes would find that Bill would tell you what he thought was in the President's mind when in fact it was what he hoped was in the President's mind. For a reporter there's a hell of a difference between those two, and so you could get burned on a story with Moyers from time to time.

Bill, I think, would be a little more prone to mislead you, or let you go a wrong way if your bent was that way, than was Reedy. Not a basically dishonest man, I don't mean to say that at all, but he'd bend with things a little better.

Christian was, I'd have to say, the best of the three for me. You get differences of opinion on this. One thing about George is that he, having come from the outside so to speak, I mean he was not in fact a Lyndon Johnson protege, got a little better deal coming in. Also, the temper of the times for Johnson were better. Christian, number one, he was around. You knew that Christian knew most things. You couldn't always be sure of that with even Moyers, certainly not with Reedy. But with Christian, if he wanted to be in a session, he was in it. For example the upper room, the so-called Tuesday group, Christian was in there, so he knew. He didn't tell you much, but he wouldn't waste many words nor much of your time if he wasn't going to tell you. George was very much, "If I can tell you and I want to tell you, I'm going to tell you. This is the way it is." You could make book on it. If he couldn't tell you, he'd say, "Yes, I know, but I can't tell you" or "I won't tell you." If he didn't know he'd say, "I don't know" and either "I'll find out," and he would find out, or "I don't know, and I'm not going to find out." Then you could make book on it. There's great value there for a reporter. The other thing about George is he didn't waste your time. If he thought you were sniffing up a wrong alley, he'd let you know pretty quickly. It's one thing to

knowingly mislead you; it's another thing if you're headed in the wrong direction to let you keep on going that way. George didn't do either.

F: I rather gather in a way Bill enjoyed it as a game, as a kind of an exercise.

R: He did, and that kind of made it fun for me, too, in terms of enjoyment. And also Bill's an exciting person, an exciting personality and a very smart person. Bill really, in my own opinion again clearly labelled, was better at what he did before he got to be press secretary. He was better on the inside operating in that role than he was as press secretary. Of course what he tried to do was pull President Johnson through a bad period and pick up the Reedy shortcomings. But Christian was awfully good. Christian was the most professional of the group. I'll tell you frankly, if I were a Republican president I wouldn't hesitate to hire George Christian, or a vegetarian president to hire him. I mean, if he took the job, he'd do it.

F: I really gather he belongs with Hagerty as kind of a reporter's [press secretary].

R: Right, a pro. The difference was that Hagerty could control his man. Christian couldn't. Nobody controlled Lyndon Johnson that I know of, and certainly not Christian. He could to some degree put in an oar. I don't mean Hagerty could go in and order President Eisenhower around, but you know the relationship. President

Eisenhower gave him wide latitude to deal. George didn't have that wide a latitude.

F: Did the credibility gap come through the press secretary or did it come directly from the President?

R: No, it came directly from the President. I'll tell you, the credibility gap would have been three miles wider and eighteen miles deeper if he hadn't had as good press secretaries as was the case. No, it came from him himself. Part of it was we saw too much of him. I'm critical of the way President Nixon has handled it, but also you have to be critical [of Johnson].

F: It's hard to hit that middle ground.

R: There's got to be a middle ground in there somewhere. President Johnson was right about wanting to know reporters individually; he was wrong about insisting on seeing them as much as he did all the time. It's just this thing of getting in too close. Stories have a way of growing. When a man invites you into his bedroom, his bathroom, his kitchen and everywhere else, stories inevitably are going to come.

F: Did you get some of those?

R: Oh, sure. I mean one of the continuing mysteries in my mind, you know, is trivia: in Lyndon Johnson's White House bedroom, by actual count, there were eleven bottles of Lavoris at one time, all in various stages of use. I never had the guts to ask him what that was about. For all I know, there were eleven different people using them. But it's that sort of thing. [You would] leave there

and instead of thinking sometimes about the substance of what he had to say or have your thoughts on these cosmic problems, you'd think, "What in the--?"

F: Did he ever demonstrate that shower to you?

R: No, not the shower, but I've heard about it. He never demonstrated it. I think it was in there. He was a great guy for gadgets. Once we were in the upstairs dining room, and he was talking about war and peace. There is this great mural of Cornwallis surrendering. President Johnson had a bad habit of talking sometimes when he was eating. He was such a nonstop talker he would sometimes talk with his mouth full, and you couldn't understand what he said sometimes. I remember leaning very hard, I was at the end of the table, trying to hear every word he said, and I kept hearing this noise go, bzzzzzzz, bzzzzzzz. I thought, "What in the hell is that? I can't figure out what that was." It turned out he had an electric pepper grinder--he loved pepper, you know--an electric pepper grinder, and he loved to use that thing. What it was, he was putting pepper on his salad, and bzzzzzz. And his telephone gimmicks and all of that he liked. So the shower story, I have no reason to doubt. But there was an overemphasis on that kind of trivia simply because people knew it.

Also, anecdotes grew up, based broadly on facts perhaps, but they got all out of hand. By the time they had passed through three or four people they became gospel and later wound up in books. A

lot of those things there was a grain of truth in, but they became larger than life.

F: Did he ever just stretch out and philosophize to you at any length?

R: A lot of times. I say a lot of times, more often than not it was in a group of three or four reporters, but one or two times on a [one-to-one basis].

F: Did he tell you things you in a sense had no business knowing?

R: I can't truthfully say that. I frequently went away with a feeling that he had told me something I had no business knowing, but then later I'd get to thinking about it, "Well, I don't really think that's--" I think he was much more aware than he was given credit for then or now of exactly what he was telling you. He told us an awfully lot about the Glassboro meeting with Mr. Kosygin. At one stage it was a conversation either alone or perhaps with one other reporter, Thompson, who was at that time with Hearst, I think perhaps was there, but he went into great detail about some personal things with Mr. Kosygin. I thought at the time maybe he shouldn't have said that because, "If it gets out that he said that, that could be hurtful." But later on I came to think,"I don't think so."

F: Is there anything we ought to put in the record?

R: I really ought to go back to my notes on it. One thing I remember, he said that it made him nervous, uneasy--because Kosygin had a knee quirk which he described. His knee kind of jumping and shaking, and Kosygin would hold it. The inference wasn't that Kosygin was nervous in his jumping of the knee.

F. More like a tic.

R: More like a tic. President Johnson felt, and it was by way of explaining when he went into this session with Kosygin, that he thought it was very important that Kosygin know that he was friendly but firm, fair but tough. He described how he lectured himself. President Johnson would lecture himself. He wanted to look Kosygin square in the eye. I said to you earlier, you know, he could drill you, Johnson could. [He was] like a school boy debater saying, "I just want to run down a checklist of things I ought to do." He wanted to look Kosygin square in the eye, and by no means, even by accident, did he want to convey any sign of weakness or nervousness on his part. What he was saying is that this knee business and Kosygin putting his hand on to kind of still this made him, Johnson, uneasy, and he was fearful that this uneasiness might somehow get the talks off to a bad start.

F: A little disconcerting.

R: A little disconcerting. That's the sort of thing that could be misconstrued, particularly in the context of the time, if that got out that he was talking.

One time he came out at the time of the Middle East crisis, and he was very vague about it, but he said, "This is much more dangerous than anybody realizes. When Americans know that was done during this period, they're going to realize what a dangerous period it was." At the time I thought maybe he shouldn't have said that, but looking back on it, he knew precisely what he was doing. He was very proud of what he had done, and he could barely contain himself.

He wanted the word out that he'd had a hand in it and had helped the Israelis, not directly, but in a very important indirect way. Obviously what he was talking about was moving the fleet in there, and they had a hot line conversation about it, which is now all on the record. That's obviously what he was looking to. So I don't recall his ever saying things he shouldn't have. It may be that with someone like William S. White, an old, old partner, that he may have said something, but I don't recall a single instance of that.

Along about the time of his funeral you say, "Well, what do you learn from someone like that?" You can't be around an overwhelming figure like Lyndon Johnson for that long and come away [untouched]. It impresses your own life, for better or for worse.

F: He left a stamp.

R: One of the things is that Johnson would make a decision. He had a reputation for being very decisive, but, boy, he got a lot of what the Nixon Administration calls input. When you compare what goes in, the number of people who are able to express an opinion on what ought to be done, with this administration and how that's done and how it's funneled into the President with President Johnson's way, there's no comparison. There was much more with President Johnson. I think it's for the better. I give him high marks for that. It's one of the things I try to do myself now. If I'm going to buy a house--this is not overstating--if I have some important decision to make, professional decision, career decision, I find

myself saying, "You ought to do it the Lyndon Johnson way, and that is, by God, talk to everybody in sight. Maybe even ask a cab driver, because the more ideas you get, the better you can make a judgment."

The other thing is that he did work like hell. It's no myth that he worked. Every president works, but again, by comparison he put in a prodigious workday, he put in a prodigious work week. Again by comparison, President Nixon has said of himself that he doesn't have great stamina, but Johnson had that stamina. Johnson programmed his time pretty well, too. There was an air of disorganization about him, but it was more apparent than real. And he did split his day up some, as you probably know. He went through a period when he'd make two days out of one.

F: In the meantime the staff--.

R: The staff just got all worn out. God, I'll say! But he did work like hell. I've always thought I was a pretty hard worker, but again, one of the things that impresses you and sticks with me is the knowledge that here was a guy who had it made, there's not much else you can do once you get to be president, and he really worked like hell.

F: I don't care to get into judgments, but I've often thought that at the time of the Eagleton affair I can't believe that Lyndon Johnson wouldn't have known what every cab driver and bartender in St. Louis would have known about Eagleton.

R: Not only that--he would have--but also he would have known the story himself. That's part of his intelligence gathering operation. A

lot of the time these people say, "President Johnson liked to know all the dirt on everybody, all the gossip," which was true, and I don't deny that it's true. That part of that was he just was pretty nosy, but he also over a lifetime in politics realized that all of this stuff, you never know when it's going to come in handy. He prided himself on knowing every man's vulnerabilities. I can tell you that he knew ofthat press corps in the same way that he knew in the United States Senate every man's strengths and weaknesses. He knew every reporter's strengths and weaknesses, whether it's whiskey or women or gambling or whatever. He had the book on you one way or the other. I don't mean to suggest, because I don't think it's true, that he got this in illegal or devious ways. I don't think he depended on FBI reports or any such thing. He just made it his business to know, and he knew and he had the book on reporters.

F: Did he ever try to mine you on Vietnam?

R: No, not mine me. When I first came back Moyers set up a session with the President. I think Bill, again, made it a point of doing that. I was never certain whether it was Moyers' idea or the President's idea, but the President was very generous with his time, asked me some about what I had seen, what I had heard, what I thought. I must say that I wasn't very good in that session because of a certain presumptuousness about it. I wish I had been more candid now that I look back on it, but it's not an easy thing to do.

F: It's difficult to come in and tell the President off.

R: You can't tell him off. He's being nice enough to listen to you, and you're not so sure you're right when you're talking about a war. You're talking about a lot of mothers' sons' lives and things. And I don't know, my firmest ideas about Vietnam were before I went. I came out sure in the knowledge--

F: What did you see in Vietnam?

R: Mostly what you saw were people just trying to make another day. The lasting impressions of the place are these masses of people who didn't give a damn who won, who simply got up in the morning, hoping and praying to make another day.

F: Are you talking about the Vietnamese?

R: Vietnamese, trying to make it another day. The other thing I saw was the American military classic case of what they were trained for the last war. They were great soldiers and well led. General Walt was every man's dream of a field commander. I don't think he made a good commandant of the Marine Corps, as President Johnson thought he would, but he was one hell of a field commander. But there was nothing original nor profound in it. It was a classic occidental approach to warfare.

F: They didn't line up like the Germans?

R: No, and they were not attuned to the politics. You see, this is a political war, as we all now know, and we weren't attuned to that. We were not geared to fight it. I was very disappointed in the Marine Corps. By and large, the best units I saw there were the First Air Cavalry, which is an army unit, and the marines. Of the

units I was with I thought they performed best, but the marines did it the hard way. They just did it by sticking their nose in there, and they used tactics that to my own mind [were wrong]. Mind you, I was a buck-ass private in the Marine Corps when I was in the service and don't have a lot of experience, but there are things you know you know. You can see when certain things are wrong. Using seaborne landings in Vietnam, there was very seldom any necessity for that, but they did a fair amount of it simply because that's what they were trained to do.

But the big thing is this mind fix that if you pour enough equipment to it, you can get it done. I might have made that same decision myself had I been General Westmoreland in the beginning. They built this tremendous pipeline. You know, the pipeline to Vietnam that McNamara built is one of the great military achievements of all time. I mean, God, fantastic! But it turned in the end to be counterproductive. There was a belief that equipment could do it; I mean, if you just put enough equipment in there, how can you fail? Well, there was a way to fail, and we found it.

F: Did you get the feeling that to a certain extent it was run by PR men?

R: No, not so much. There were PR men around. No, not PR men.

F: Could you go where you wanted to?

R: I went absolutely where I wanted to. Now I'm told in later stages of the war this was not the case, but when I was there we were

basically in the hitchhiking basis. We hitchhiked rides on the front of--

F: You just decide you want to be somewhere and you go?

R: And you go. I never tried to get anywhere that I couldn't get, even under extreme combat conditions. There were plenty of times when I said to myself, "If I were this battalion commander, I don't think I'd let me in there." Absolutely carte blanche.

The failures of reporting in Vietnam were not in my experience failures due to PR or oversell. In the military they have a case to make and they'd take you if they could, but it was basically the nature of what was going on there that nobody knew the truth. It was very hard to get to the truth. For example, you suspected that there was tremendous corruption. You start trying to prove that, and you were down into the same kind of quagmire you were into in the war.

F: A hundred thousand rumors and not one thing you could pin down.

R: Yes. As a reporter you can't just go on hearsay, you've got to have something you can pin down.

I have never bought the idea that some public relations gimmickry is what sold us in the war. It just wasn't true. It was simply a case the military was into something they didn't understand, and they made the best explanations they could come up with and the explanations were wrong. Most of the time it's what they really believed in the case. The My Lai thing: it happened after I was there, but those things were happening while I was there. I can see in my mind's

eye how that happened any number of times. I mean the reality is you've got a company commander--Johnson understood this mind you--(Interruption)

I remember that conversation with the President. We talked a little bit about how you get the right information in things, and I was saying to him that the reality is you've got a twenty-two year old platoon leader and he's taking fire from a village and he's taken four or five casualties. Now he has got several options and no more. He can walk in there and get a number of other people killed, or he can call for air and artillery and just level it. If I've got to make that decision it's one thing intellectually to say what you ought to do, you're an infantryman, is go in there house by house. But when you've got to go in and do it, that's a tough decision to make, and I can't blame anybody for saying, "Let me have the artillery and air."

F: Okay, let's quit this time.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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