INTERVIEW XVIII

DATE: June 12, 1985

INTERVIEWEE: GEORGE E. REEDY

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Professor Reedy's residence, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: Let's pursue this point on the campaign that you raised after the last question--

R: You mean the question of how the speeches were handled?

G: Right.

R: Basically what happened is that he developed a sort of a theme. The words might be different wherever he spoke, but the basic theme was that the Democratic Party was the party that was for the people, that the Democratic Party at its worst was better than the Republican Party at its best, that the Democratic Party had a deep feeling for the people and that the Republican Party, however good individual Republicans might be, was still a party of the elite. Now these are my words, not his, and they would vary from town to town, and he could be relied on to sort of feel out his audience and use the necessary words for each individual town.

There was a problem, however, with the press that was traveling with us. You know the press has two deadlines. First of all, one has the afternoon press, which in those days--that's no longer true--in those days the afternoon press had to have something

by about ten o'clock in the morning. Then there was the morning press, which had to have something by about three or four o'clock in the afternoon. So we developed a little technique. I, or anybody that I could get to do it, would figure out some sort of a news lead and write out about eight paragraphs, sometimes less than that, sometimes only four or five paragraphs, in which we would--well, the only one I can remember right now is one in which Mr. Nixon had made some rather some silly statement. I wrote out that, "Mr. Nixon has been caught with his planks down," which obviously was the lead on the story that the press was going to write. I can still remember Charlie Boatner saying to me, "George, you knew what you were doing. There's no other way this story can be written." And what I would do, once he'd approved these eight or nine paragraphs, I would have them, not mimeographed but--what do you call that process? It's a photo-offset process--well, irrelevant. I would have them distributed to the press. Then he would read that in the middle of his speech. Otherwise, all of his speeches were free-wheeling.

He had a few real speeches in the campaign, and I remember one gave us an awful lot of trouble on the train trip. Bill White had written a speech for him, and there had never been an appropriate place for that speech to be delivered because the campaign was sort of a free-style, catch-as-catch-can, soapbox type of thing. But the Bill White speech was very excellent, and what I had done was to use excerpts of it to stick into these various speeches that he was making along the way, to stick into it as a means of giving the press a lead. I remember once on the train after we left Jacksonville--and I was exhausted at that point--I was sleeping soundly in my car when Bill Whitley, who

was traveling with us--Bill worked for Senator [B. Everett] Jordan from North Carolina--waking me up and saying, "For the love of Christ, the Senator says he has got to have that Bill White speech for New Orleans. Where is it?" And I said, "For the--I don't know where the hell it is. I've been tearing it up and using it for the last three or four weeks." So what we did, at the next station where we had a fairly long stop, we got off the train real quick with Geraldine Williams, my secretary, later Geraldine Novak, who, as I've told you, could get things down just automatically. You know, it was really funny. We called Washington, and Bill White was out of town, but his secretary was there, and she found a carbon copy of that speech and read it to Geraldine Williams. I'll never forget. One of the problems--this was in a little railroad station in the South, and there was a woman talking to the ticket agent, and there was poor Geraldine three feet away trying to get all these things the secretary was saying. And by God, Geraldine managed to get every word letter perfect, and we had the speech ready for him by the time we hit New Orleans.

G: And he did give the Bill White speech.

R: Yes, he gave it at--I've forgotten what he had. Two or three big things in New Orleans.

G: Let me ask you to survey your own role in that campaign. I didn't really ask you to define your--particularly in the whistlestop--but the campaign as a whole.

R: Well, in the whistlestop, my chief role was to talk to the press and to get those little excerpts for them and to be sure that the press was fed on a regular basis. In the campaign itself overall my role was a rather peculiar one. I'm afraid I became something of a naysayer during that campaign because he was surrounded by people with ideas,

most of which were pretty poor, people that wanted him to do things that were not in character, people that wanted him to make the kinds of speeches he could not make, and I think--

G: You mean more aggressive speeches or more personal speeches?

R: Oh, no. They wanted him to be 1,000 per cent pro-civil rights or 1,000 per cent pro-this. Looking back on it, I think my real role was sort of a protective role, and it was a hard role to play because all kinds of con artists--well, they weren't really con artists, I mean they were very ambitious people, let's put it that way--would come in with various ideas of things for him to do or to say that really weren't very well advised. And I also acted as a buffer between him and the press. I could usually soften the interpretations of some of the worst things that he would do or say. I very deliberately interpreted many of the things that he was doing as being sort of funny, sort of humorous, as though he were, you know, "You've got this character. Okay, he's a character; we all know we've got to put up with it, haw-haw-haw." Like the time he raised so much hell about anybody that was not there on the--when we left Knoxville, would just be left behind. No more of this--anybody who was late, it was just too bad. They were going to be left at Knoxville, and, of course, he was the one that was late. And so the press, I think, took a cue from me, and then I started to make fun of the whole idea, got them to laughing about it, that we'd take off without the candidate.

G: Yes. Was the press that traveled with him throughout that 1960 campaign largely a sympathetic group? Did he have any--?

R: It shifted too much to be labeled that way, and by that time the press had reached a stage where it was changing assignments deliberately. In other words, somebody covering Kennedy would be sent over to cover Johnson; somebody covering Johnson would be sent over to cover Kennedy.

G: But--

R: To say it was sympathetic--I think they were on the train trip, because that really was a magnificent performance. This man, a southerner himself--although not very southern but still a southerner--was sailing right into the heart of Dixieland and really taking on, which he did, all of the prejudices of the South, taking on the job of trying to sell a Boston Irish Catholic to a bunch of southern WASPs. It really was rather magnificent. There was a drama to it that I think caught up all of the members of the press that were traveling with him.

G: Just a general question here: when he would travel through the South and speak like that, would he sound a lot of populist themes? Would he try to resurrect the old--?

R: Oh, sure. Oh, sure. Oh, boy! His southern accent got so goddamned thick on parts of that trip that at times I wondered, "Is this the Lyndon Johnson I really know?" He knew how to talk to southerners. He was really good at it.

G: Another thing that we did not talk about yesterday in detail was the train itself. Let me ask you to describe the arrangement of the train and what sort of accommodations he had, and I assume he spoke from the rear car. Is that right?

R: He had the rear car on the train, which had a shower in it. That was the only one that did. And, of course, he spoke from the back platform, and the rear car of the train was set up

like a VIP car. I suspect that what it was was an old bar car or something in which he had a stateroom, and there was some room to move around and some room to walk about. And the rest of the train was fairly ordinary Pullman. Really, it's hard to describe it in any other terms. There were press accommodations, and my accommodations, most of the staff accommodations, were in the car immediately behind him, and the--I've forgotten--where in the devil was that? There was one sort of utility car. Now where was it? The one where they had the loudspeaker, the stereos--they weren't stereos in those days--the balloons, the gas for the balloons--had big tanks to fill up the balloons. And, of course, there was a dining car and a--what else do you need to know about it?

G: Did he eat his meals in the dining car?

R: No. Oh, of course not.

G: It seems that he had flown back and forth from Washington so often. Was he impatient?

R: On that trip?

G: No, no. Just in general in his trips to Texas. Was he at all impatient with the pace of rail traffic?

R: No. He might have been except that he had so many speaking engagements. He was making sixteen to eighteen speeches a day.

G: That's a lot.

R: That sure as hell is a lot. You can't get impatient with that.

G: He would generally speak off the rear of the platform at the station, is that right? Or at some--

R: Always. Not necessarily at the station. Sometimes the train would stop in the middle of a town at a crossroads. You see, one of the main virtues of this thing was that he hit an awful lot of places that otherwise nobody would hit, like High Point, North Carolina. Who in the hell would go into High Point, North Carolina? Or Culpeper, Virginia? Or we would get off the train occasionally and take some kind of a trip, an auto trip or something like that. I think we went to Anderson, South Carolina. I'm not clear on that, but my memory is that we did, and I think that we drove that, and of course the air plane trip around Florida. But we were going through towns where you still had the old-fashioned kind of situation where the railroad tracks ran right through the center of the town.

G: Now, moving from the train itself to the overall campaign, let me ask you to assess your headquarters, your national headquarters [for] Johnson. Were they in Austin?

R: No, no. They were in Washington.

G: Washington?

R: Right. But it wasn't at all clear just who was really running it. I've told you about the experience of Ralph Huitt, who was supposed to organize this writers' staff, and who finally, when he realized that none of the speeches were being written, came on down and went on a leg of the trip and told me before he left that he understood now why the speeches weren't being used, that they weren't appropriate. It was not that kind of a campaign. What one had mostly was a sort of a liaison between us and between the Kennedy staff. [Bill] Moyers had an awful lot of the liaison simply because he took it

upon himself to have that liaison. The rest of us, I'm afraid, were sitting back waiting for instructions from Johnson, not realizing Johnson was waiting for word from us.

G: All right. What about Cliff Carter? What was his role?

R: Well, Cliff Carter's major role was sort of an overall supervision of the advance work. Now, Marty Underwood was in direct control of the advance work. I mean, he was the man that decided who would be assigned to what, but Cliff was sort of liaison between the advance men and Johnson.

G: Okay. How about Jim Blundell?

R: Jim just sort of handled Texas.

G: Okay.

R: He was in the national office, but--he may have had more to do with it than I knew. When you're out in the field the way we were, you didn't have too much of an idea what was going on back in Washington, and I suppose to us it really didn't make too much difference.

G: Yes. Okay. Well, I think we've covered everything I have on the campaign itself. Now, let's move again to the transition, and the first thing I have is the notion on LBJ's part that he could retain some formal role other than the presiding one in the Senate itself.

R: Oh, boy [inaudible]. Right.

G: How do you think that got started?

R: That was in his own mind, I believe, and he was sort of encouraged in it--not precisely encouraged in it--but he talked to various people, who didn't have enough overall philosophy to argue with him, who sort of assumed that he knew what he was doing, and

he didn't really in this field. There were some strange episodes. One, of course, the most revealing one, took place after--was it after? Just when was that famous letter written in which he, in effect, wanted Kennedy to sign a letter saying that Johnson would take over the armed services?

G: Foreign policy, I think it was.

R: Well, armed services mostly. Was that before or after the inauguration? That was a typical example. Ken BeLieu I think had more to do with drafting the letter than anybody else. And of course Ken just made the assumption that he knew what he was doing, that he and Kennedy had talked about this, and that this was an agreement between them. Well, of course, that was one that really flabbergasted the Kennedy people when they saw that letter. It was incredible to ask the President of the United States to give up his control over the armed services of the United States. Wow!

G: You didn't have any knowledge of it before it was sent out?

R: No. Oh, I had some knowledge. Ken told me, but it was too late for me to play any role in it at all. That was one example, and of course he started to sound out his Democratic colleagues about the caucuses. And boy, he did that all on his own. He didn't have any advice on that whatsoever. And to me it is still incredible that a man who knew the Senate as well as he knew the Senate would do such a goddamned foolish thing. You know, the Senate is distrustful of any vice president. This is a very deep psychology. If you look at the Constitution--you know about the non-amendable section of the Constitution?

G: No.

R: There is one section of the Constitution which, according to the Constitution, cannot be amended, which says that every state shall have equal representation in the Senate, and this article cannot be changed. It was one of the compromises the founding fathers had to make in order to secure the allegiance of the small states to the Constitution. But no matter why the founding fathers did it, what you have in the Senate is an almost paranoid distrust of vice presidents on the theory that the vice president might use his office to tilt the balance somewhere and give some state an unfair advantage. This is why the Senate has always turned such a cold shoulder to vice presidents.

G: Well, don't both the president and the vice president give some states an advantage, namely their home states?

R: Not in the Senate.

G: But in terms of governing the country as a whole?

R: That's not what that--that's not the point. The point is not whether the president is going to give his home state--the point is will the Senate be tilted? In other words, is there going to be a state with three senators? I'm afraid you don't fully understand this whole question of the division of powers as seen by the Senate. It's not--of course, if the president of the United States is from some state, he's going to have sentimental attachments to that state, but in the Senate itself, there is a very strong psychology that each state shall have two votes. Now, the president doesn't have a vote in the Senate. The vice president does under some circumstances. So they distrust the vice president. You will find the vice president gets cold-shouldered, every vice president that has ever served in the Senate, with the sole exception of Alben Barkley. He's the only exception.

Every other one has felt this, the fact that the Senate is suspicious of him. You will find that vice presidents after a while stop presiding over the Senate as much as they possibly can. They let the president *pro tem* do it, or whoever the president *pro tem*--but Johnson's proposal to chair the caucus--my God! That just horrified them.

G: Well, now, as I understand it, the motion was offered by [Mike] Mansfield. Is that correct?

R: Right.

G: And it did pass, but there were a lot of dissenting votes, or what?

R: It wasn't a question of dissenting votes.

G: Seventeen or something like that?

R: It wasn't a question of dissenting votes. Votes are not what count in the Senate. What counts in the Senate are attitudes, and the--I don't know why in the hell Johnson, who had understood the Senate so perfectly well up to that point, did not see it. As a matter of fact, it became perfectly clear to him that he had better not even attend the Senate caucuses because as far as the senators were concerned, he had no business being on those Senate caucuses.

G: But they did vote--what, 46 to 17?--to invite him.

R: To attend.

G: Yes.

R: But that was just a face-saver. That was just a face-saver. You know, it's terribly hard to explain the Senate to somebody who isn't close to it.

G: But weren't there seventeen votes that would vote against him even when he was majority leader?

R: No. No. I don't know how to explain this. In the world of the Senate, what the Senate does is entirely the business of the Senate. What the Senate does is not to be tilted by the president, not to be tilted by the vice president. Any kind of pressure from the outside is bitterly resented and can very often lead to a rebellion of the Senate. One of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's worst mistakes was to veto a tax bill, which led Alben Barkley to resign his majority leadership and led Roosevelt to apologize all over the place to get the Senate back into a mood where it would work with him again. In terms of the Senate, vice presidents are unwelcome, especially a vice president who has been a senator. As far as the Senate's concerned, there are two senators from Texas, and if the vice president is from Texas and has been a senator from Texas, then he is going to be regarded with very deep suspicion.

G: How did Johnson react to this rebuff? I guess he--

R: He was hurt. He was badly hurt, which really startled me.

G: Did you talk to him about it?

R: No. No, because the thing was done. That was a very strange period. He was--he was kind of at a loose end. He really didn't know what to do with himself. He wasn't quite sure what a vice president did. I'm told that somewhere along the line he said that "Power is where power goes," meaning that he thought he would have power simply because he was a powerful man. After he became vice president, he called some of the worst staff meetings he ever called, in which he would do nothing but bawl out the staff

for not answering mail. The man literally didn't know what to do. Buzz [Horace Busby] wrote him a long memorandum on the vice presidency, which really was of very little help to him. Buzz was quite right. What Buzz said is, "It becomes obvious that the only thing that's important about the vice president is the succession." He wanted--I never wrote him a memorandum on it, but in conversation I told him that I had made a little check and that this business of the vice president breaking ties was really virtually useless, that [there were] about ten tie votes a year and only on three of them did it make any difference if the vice president would vote. That was on the average, and those are usually in very unimportant matters. But he struck out. He had that letter that Ken BeLieu drew up for him, which Kennedy very mercifully tossed into a waste basket. It was silly. He played around thinking that he could become a force in the caucus, to discover that, by God, he had better stay out of those caucuses.

G: He reportedly made the remark that "Now, I know the difference between a caucus and a cactus." Do you remember that?

R: No, I don't, but I can see the point.

G: You never heard him say it?

R: No. I never heard him say, "Power is where power goes," either.

G: Really. Of course--

R: Actually, Kennedy was rather generous to him, you know.

G: Well, at least at the time, it was billed as a very useful vice presidential role, and Kennedy had carved out several areas that he wanted Johnson to deal with.

R: You see, when Johnson analyzed those areas, he discovered something very quickly. For instance, the President's Advisory Committee on Outer Space and Aeronautics. Advisory. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. That was one which really was a derivative power of the President with somewhat of a dubious legal base. That was really about all that he could do, but when he discovered--there's another way of looking at it. When he discovered that none of the power was his, I think that's the basic point. He had not realized that any power that a vice president has is just power which has been given to him by a president and can be taken back. This is what really makes the vice presidency such a horrible job for most politicians. They want their own power.

G: Certainly one of the issues was the issue of judicial appointments, and you had a senior senator from Texas, now Ralph Yarborough, who had supported Kennedy before Kennedy received the nomination, supported Kennedy over Johnson, and yet there was some accommodation to the Vice President on those judgeships. Can you tell me how that--?

R: Very little. That was something that Kennedy and Johnson handled all by themselves. On things like that, he would never use staff.

G: Why?

R: He just wouldn't.

G: But there was some formula for Johnson naming some judges, and Yarborough naming some judges.

R: He would never tell you about them. On a thing like that, Johnson would get very secretive. Nobody would know it, literally. When that man really wanted to be secretive, he could.

G: Do you think this was a trouble spot in his relations with Yarborough, the whole patronage issue?

R: I think it hurt him, and by hurt, I mean that I think it hurt him psychologically. I don't think he ever realized that all the privileges of the senator had now gone to somebody else. Well, let me put it another way: all the privileges of the senator that he had enjoyed because they were his own power now belonged to another man, and here he was, sitting there with no power whatsoever. You see, that is why vice presidents start banging their heads against the wall. They have absolutely no power.

G: But he did get to name some of these. He did share Yarborough's power.

R: Yes, because Kennedy let him, don't you see?

G: Yes, well--

R: Kennedy let him, but it wasn't the same thing as when he was the senator. You see, a senator has power. A senator has a vote, and as long as you've got a vote, you've got something you can trade. If you're a vice president, anything you get like that is sort of a crumb brushed off of the table.

G: Oh, you're looking at it from Kennedy's angle. If you look at it from Yarborough's--

R: I'm looking at it from Johnson's angle.

G: If you look at it from Yarborough's angle, Yarborough is denied a certain amount of power.

R: I think that--well, in a sense, that made it worse because Yarborough--it wasn't that Yarborough was denied a certain amount of power. Yarborough graciously allowed this to happen, and that really must have been rubbing salt in Johnson's wounds. You see, Yarborough--if Yarborough had wanted to be nasty about it, Johnson would not have had a single appointment. Because all Yarborough had to do was stand up in the Senate and say, "Personal privilege," and that was the end of it. So in a sense, the agreement that Johnson could name some and that Yarborough could name some really hurt the hell out of Johnson because Yarborough had to agree to it, too. Johnson didn't have to agree to it for Yarborough to name them, but Yarborough had to agree to it for Johnson to name them. I don't think you understand this man. This was a man that was accustomed to making decisions, to doing things from a position of power, and all of a sudden he discovers that the only power that he has is power the President is conferring upon him with the consent of the senior senator from Texas. That rankled.

G: How was John Connally appointed secretary of the navy?

R: Oh, I think that was a--I don't know for sure. I suspect that Johnson asked Kennedy for it and that Kennedy did it. It never occurred to me to look into the reasons why. I just assumed that it was a bone tossed to Johnson.

G: Was that Johnson's major bone, do you think?

R: Well, it depends on how you look at it. It was probably--I thought Johnson really got a number of major bones. One, for example, was the chairmanship of the Advisory Committee on Outer Space. That was terribly important. I was one of those--you know, I helped physically draft the Space Act. Gerry Siegel and I did most of it, and we had set

up this committee to make it independent of the president but still a committee which would feed advice into the president and have some influence on him. And Eisenhower decided he did not want that committee to be under anybody else, and Eisenhower made the price of signing the bill, virtually, that he be the chairman, the president be the chairman. Well, that meant the committee didn't do anything. So when Kennedy came in, one of the first things Kennedy did was to go back to the original concept of the act and make Johnson the chairman of the committee. Now, I thought that was one hell of a concession, because at least it gave Johnson the power to call meetings, it gave Johnson the power to produce reports, to produce authoritative advice to the President. I thought the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was a tremendous sop to Johnson. I'm not sure, though, that he saw those that way. He may have seen patronage as the more important thing, and he didn't get too much patronage.

G: In terms of patronage, any other major appointments that were Johnson people?

R: Oh, I can't think of any.

G: I know he got someone like Charlie Boatner in Interior and people in the lower levels.

R: Oh, that was--that was rather--Charlie got that pretty much for himself. Bill Lloyd became head of public affairs at NASA, but again, Bill got that pretty much for himself.

G: Moyers was [Sargent] Shriver's deputy in the Peace Corps.

R: Oh, Moyers just about walked out on Johnson to get that one.

G: Anything else on the staffing aspect of the--?

R: The vice presidency?

G: Yes.

R: It was very much a helter-skelter thing. He just sort of left most of his staff to hang.

G: Did he have a net loss in staff positions going from majority leader to vice president?

R: I would think so, yes, because he didn't have the Policy Committee any more, and he didn't have the--I never counted up.

G: But it seems like more of his staff people that he had from his Senate days did go into the executive in other--well, [Harry] McPherson went to what? Defense, or something? Moyers went to Peace Corps. Various others were farmed out--

R: Where the hell did McPherson go? Yes, McPherson went to Defense, I guess. Moyers, Peace Corps. But, of course, Moyers had negotiated that before the election, really. Johnson was very put out by Bill walking out and joining the Peace Corps.

G: Oh, really?

R: Oh yes, and how! But he paid no attention to Bill Lloyd, paid no attention to Charlie Boatner, didn't pay too much attention to me, really. I can still recall--I could have gone with Kennedy. I was called in by Mike Feldstein.

G: Feldman, yes.

R: Feldman. Wanted to know what I was going to do. I said, "I figure I'll be with Johnson." And, later, I wondered what in the hell was going on. I talked to Solis Horwitz about it, and Solis talked to Mike, and Mike told him that they were considering me for the job that Dick Goodwin got later on.

G: Had Johnson's enthusiasm started to wane at this point? Was he--?

R: Started to wane? Mother of mercy! I think it was the Senate rebuff that did it more than anything else. When it became apparent to him that he was *persona non grata* with most

of the Senate Democrats and that Kennedy was not going to turn the Defense Department over to him, I think that at that point he went into this almost skidding reverse and became the Johnson of the vice presidential years, which became almost a caricature of a man in complete dejection. You know, all the gags about "Lyndon Who?"

G: "Whatever happened to the Vice President?"

R: Yes, that sort of thing really hurt him badly, and the man kind of went into a rather deep funk. He really didn't want to do much of anything. At the time they took over the Elms, Les Ormes, I know he didn't particularly want to do that. He figured he would rather stay in the Shoreham--not the Shoreham, the Wardman Park, which was where they were staying at the time, but he got talked out of that.

There was a floundering. One could not avoid the realization that he didn't know where he was going or what he wanted to do, what he was going to do with it, or that he was beginning to feel terribly sorry for himself and that he was absolutely convinced that the whole Kennedy Administration was one big plot headed by Bobby Kennedy to dump him at the earliest possible moment. But the floundering was incredible.

Of course, you had that one episode before the inauguration. Kennedy thought it would be a very good idea for Johnson to go down for a conference with Lopez Mateos. I think I've covered this, haven't I?

G: No.

R: He thought it would be a very good idea for Johnson to go down for a conference with Lopez Mateos, who had really become a rather good friend of Johnson's. I had come to know Lopez Mateos fairly well myself.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XVIII

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