INTERVIEW XXVII

DATE: December 13, 1990

INTERVIEWEE: GEORGE REEDY

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. Reedy's office at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: Let's turn to your return to the White House, and your initial project was the maritime strike, is that right?

R: That was the first thing that I actually worked on, yes. It was kind of peculiar. I didn't know why he wanted me back in the White House. I didn't particularly want to go.

G: How were you approached?

R: A number of different ways. It was mostly Sam Houston, who acted as though he were not speaking for his brother necessarily, but reflecting his brother's views. Well, I'd become a bit tired of Struthers Wells anyway. I'm not a businessman at heart and never will be any good at it. But again, Sam was visiting me day after day after day and a couple of other hints came through to me, too; I've forgotten where it was. And eventually, I just gave up and went on in.

Now, about that point, Charlie Murphy was brought in, too, and Murphy hadn't particularly wanted to come back. He'd gotten a fair amount of heat. He was with a law firm; he'd been in the Agriculture Department before that. So we had lunch one day, talking it over. We came to the conclusion that it only made sense if he was getting ready to run for reelection.

The White House that Charlie Murphy and I walked back into was the most amateurish White House from a political standpoint I have ever seen. It had just lost all political expertise whatsoever. And the Democratic National Committee was even in worse shape. God, they didn't even know the names of the state chairmen unless they looked them up in a handbook.

I remember one of the first things that I did--when Charlie and I decided that's what he [LBJ] was up to, we just went ahead and started to work. And I got India Edwards to come back to the committee, which was a break except that in about a week she was calling me weeping on my shoulder. It was awful. The Wisconsin primary was coming up and I couldn't find anybody to send out here that knew anything about Wisconsin.

I finally got Bill--oh, what was his name? I've forgotten it now. He was in the Agriculture Department. It will come to me. But he was--the man had never been in Wisconsin before, but he had had plenty of political experience working for the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] and as a political adviser for various other organizations. In two or three days *he* was calling me and weeping on my shoulder.

G: What did he say?

R: He said he "had to pay for absolutely everything out here." Now that's a bad sign. If you can't get people that are willing to mimeograph for you, that are willing to distribute leaflets, that will go out and work to set up meetings, you're in trouble. Because one of the characteristics of American politics is you always get people that are excited about it and will go in and do all the work free. If you couldn't find people like that the cost of

campaigning would be unbearable. And to be in the situation that he was in--was it Joe?--was just unsupportable.

Well, I'm getting--at this late date, I'm not quite sure of my time lapses. I know at one point, when I saw how bad Wisconsin was and various other places, I sat down and wrote a memo--I don't know what ever happened to it now, if it's in the files or not--in which what I said, in effect, was that he could still win the nomination and even the election, but he had to do a number of things, including cleaning out the Democratic National Committee, getting some Irish voices in there, somebody that at least knew who the state chairmen were; that he had to do something about Vietnam, I didn't know what, but he had to start pulling out somehow.

I've never known what happened to that memo. I don't think it's in your files, because I think somebody would have asked me about it. I put that memo in to him on a Friday, and it was a Sunday that he pulled [it] out--and I'll go to my deathbed wondering whether that memo--that he took one look at it and said, "To hell with this." You know, sometimes--and lose them [?]. But I'm pretty sure that that one--I doubt if it's there because I think if it were anywhere where it was available, that somebody would have asked me about it.

But I remember it very distinctly. I was trying to make it as soft as I possibly could because the truth was, his position was almost impossible at that point. He could do something, but it would have required, oh, just back-breaking labor.

G: Aside from sending someone out to Wisconsin, had you done anything else to prepare for the 1968 campaign?

R: No, because I wasn't there long enough. As I said, I got India Edwards back into the committee, and sent Joe--was it Guffy? No, it wasn't Guffy; I think it was Miller, Joe Miller--out to Wisconsin and that was it.

G: Did you watch the March 31 speech on television?

R: Yes.

G: Were you--?

R: I was in a Chinese restaurant. There was a restaurant down on 13th Street, the Peking. I knew the owner quite well, and he set up a television set and Lillian and I were eating in the--and halfway through his speech, I said to Lillian, "My God, he's going to pull out." I don't know how I realized it, but I did. And then he went through the whole speech and the last thing, of course, was his statement that he wasn't going to run again, which, by the way, I under--I had [have?] been told he had been carrying around for a number of months; I don't know if that's true or not.

G: I haven't heard that. I know he had thought about it earlier, doing it at the State of the Union message.

R: Ask Buz [Horace Busby] about it. I think Buz would know.

G: So what did you do after you heard the speech? Did you--?

R: There wasn't much I could do. I called him just to--best wishes, and then came the problem of what I was going to do for the rest of the year. Now, I'd given up my connections with Struthers Wells, didn't want to go back, and there wasn't anything else in the offing, so I sort of did odd jobs around the White House.

Do you know the time period on the maritime strike?

G: It was September to the end of the year, I think.

R: That was one that I remember. It was a rather interesting situation. You know the facts on it, don't you?

G: Essentially, yes, but before we get to that, any insights on the [Martin Luther] King assassination or the events of that spring and summer? You had two assassinations, the Washington riots.

R: Well, I know in the King assassination, we were out in Hawaii when it happened and the--I've forgotten what he was doing out there; he went out there for some reason. That gave me a long chance to talk to the general staff out at Pearl Harbor--but then when the thing broke, we got back to the United States as fast as we could. [Editorial note: The President had planned to go to Hawaii but cancelled his trip when he learned of the King assassination.]

I've forgotten whether that was the trip that General [William] Westmoreland was on or not. I know that I was on a long trip with him coming back from Hawaii, and that may have been it; I'm not sure. But I can remember getting into Washington [D.C.] early in the morning and calling Lillian. We were way up in northwest Washington. The riots never got that far. Lillian was telling me what a strange thing it was to go out of the house and walk down the street and see paratroopers patrolling Connecticut Avenue.

George Christian and I got together and went over to the National Press Building, because that's your best view of the riot area, from the National Press Building--National Press Club--and saw a lot of rather strange things. I remember one of the interesting deals was that on the east side of Fourteenth Street every shop was smashed. On the west

side nothing had been touched, same street. The west side had places like Garfinkel's and what have you.

And later when I was talking to one of the staff members in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, he said, "That's very simple. To those blacks, Garfinkel's didn't exist. They couldn't see it. They didn't shop there, whereas on the other side of the street, you had all these little cheap-john shops. You know, where they sold shoes at a discount, that sort of thing. And to them, that existed." A rather strange phenomenon. But I know it's true you will find that you--if they took any pictures at the time, you'll find that one side of the street was totally wrecked, the other side wasn't touched.

G: Anything on the Kennedy assassination?

R: You mean Bobby?

G: Yes.

R: The main thing I remember, I'd gone to bed early that night and Sam Houston called me. He was watching on TV and all of a sudden he said, "My God, they've shot him." And I said, "Who?" He said, "Bobby Kennedy."

I don't know how he [LBJ] reacted to that. He and Bobby Kennedy had not gotten along at all well. Those two men just took an immediate and instant dislike to each other. They were like two dogs meeting in a room. I don't think he'd want him killed or anything like that, but every relationship that he had ever had with Bobby Kennedy was a very scratchy one, very scratchy.

You know, at that particular time, one of the things that had happened is that he

really sort of walled himself off from the world, not just the outer world outside the White House, but inside the White House. Very few of the assistants saw him at all. I only saw him a few times and I think most of them didn't see him at all. He really just sort of shrunk within himself, and the result is that a lot of the things that happened during that period involved factors and involved thoughts that only he himself could answer [for]. But he became very introspective, very moody, I think very anxious to get out.

I think he had a feeling of failure, really. I remember that night when he was talking about pulling out. I am absolutely convinced that he had reached the conclusion that the Vietnam War had to be brought to an end and that he had to somehow negotiate a settlement, and that the Viet Cong was not going to negotiate a settlement as long as he was running for the presidency. I really think that was a decisive factor in his mind.

I know a lot of people have talked about that speech as though it were--

(Interruption)

Where was I?

G: You were talking about that he would have to--

R: I've heard a number of stories that that day something happened that made him decide it was imperative to put an end to the war. Have I ever told you the story that Juanita [Roberts?] told me?

G: No.

R: I haven't the faintest idea whether this is true or not, but Juanita was usually pretty good about her reporting when it came to facts. She said that that morning--

G: This is the morning of the March 31 speech?

R: Yes, when he pulled out. She says that that morning, Lynda Bird came in to breakfast and she had a letter that had been written to her by some woman talking about her husband who was a marine, and how they'd gotten married and how wonderful it was to be doing things for him, *et cetera*, and finally he went to Vietnam and she said he was supposed to come back in rotation yesterday, and he was killed two hours before he was supposed to come back. The story I heard was that Lynda Bird stamped her foot and said, "Daddy, if anything happens to Chuck over there, I'll never speak to you again."

Now, I haven't the faintest idea and I do not want to present this as something that I think or I'm convinced happened. I am convinced, however, that something did happen to precipitate that decision for him to pull out. Of course, Juanita's dead now and no way in the world--you can't check the story.

G: Did he ever talk about his decision in retrospect?

R: No.

G: Do you think he ever regretted it? Do you think he ever considered initiating a draft or anything to--

R: Oh, I just don't believe that--I don't know. You see, it was shortly after he left that my book on the presidency became known to him, and I never knew for sure whether he interpreted it as an attack upon him, but I know a lot of his staff did. But our relations became quite cold. I never saw him after he left Washington, never saw him again.

I wrote to him once or twice, and got letters back, but even that stopped after the--I've heard all kinds of stories as to how he reacted to my book [*The Twilight of the*

Presidency]. One, that he assigned four people to read it--I doubt if he ever did--and two of them said it was disloyal and two of them said it wasn't disloyal, meaning you pays your money and you takes your choice.

He was awfully funny about books. I only know of two books that I'm convinced that he read. One is *The Raven* and the other was that *Rich Nations, Poor Nations.*

But life around the White House during that period was--it was kind of a ghost mansion. I think almost everybody was trying to see where they would go from there. I know Leonard Marks contacted me and he had a proposition to start a supplemental newspaper in South America, which was a good proposition. In fact, if we'd have tried it a year earlier it would have worked. Unfortunately, we tried it during a year where it couldn't possibly work, but we didn't know that at the time. And Charlie Murphy, of course, got busy in the transition to Nixon.

One rather bad deal was Hubert Humphrey. Hubert almost got euchred into [out of?] being the candidate out at Chicago. But Johnson was blowing hot and blowing cold on Hubert. I think Hubert could have made it with a little more cooperation. But he wouldn't let anybody do anything for Hubert. I gave Hubert some private help, I mean advice and that sort of thing, as well as I could. But Hubert was left very much on his own. During the last two weeks Hubert finally just got desperate and broke--almost broke with Johnson, and he started to pick up right away. I think [with] a couple of more weeks, Hubert might have won that.

G: Tell me about the maritime strike.

R: Which?

G: The longshoremen, the maritime dock strike.

R: I don't remember that one.

G: The fall of 1968.

R: Fall of 1968. My God, that's completely slipped my mind. I remember the maritime strike very well, but . . . You know, I have a hunch that that thing got settled somehow, because--is this the only memo you have from me on it?

G: Well, let's see, I think there are others. Here's another one that quotes you.

R: I don't remember this at all. I think probably because I didn't do anything other than give advice. Rereading those two memos, I'm aware of why I would have advised him against the Taft-Hartley injunction route. I still think I was right. Do you know if he actually did invoke the Taft-Hartley procedures or not?

G: Yes, I think he did eventually. But not right away, I hope. Now, tell me about that.

R: That one arose because it had become traditional in the maritime industry for the ship owners to settle for relatively high wages for the workers, with the maritime commission making up the difference between what they could really pay and what they'd negotiated. And the differences are rather extreme.

We had a new maritime commissioner, the name was Johnson, Nicholas Johnson, I think--and he thought, and he was quite right, that this thing was getting silly, that the ship owners were not really negotiating in the hard and fast manner that everybody expects business to negotiate, because they didn't really give a damn how high the wages were. They weren't going to pay them anyway. They were going to be paid by the federal government. And Nick Johnson announced that by God, he was not going to

approve federal payments of those outrageous wages. And Johnson made a public announcement that the whole question had been turned over to me.

Well, I immediately got flooded with telegrams, *et cetera*, from labor and from the [National] Maritime Union, including Joe Curran. But looking over the situation, I could see that that had nothing to do with it, that at bottom it was a question of Nick Johnson. And Nick Johnson and myself, and--was it O'Connor, was that the secretary of commerce at that point?

G: John T. Connor, yes.

R: Yes. We had a session in the White House and what I said is, "Look, I know that you told them in advance you weren't going to pay it, but they all thought that what you would do would be to refuse the payment at first and then cave in. So they went ahead under a false impression." And I cited to them the difference between what people will say when they're just chewing the rag and what they'll say when there's a genuine knife in their belly.

And I was persuasive enough that finally Connor said he was just going to go ahead and reverse Johnson anyway. I think Johnson got badly shaken by the whole thing. He wrote me a note the next day, in which, in effect, he said he had never before been confronted with so much logic. He had a position at that point from which he couldn't back down. I'm rather glad he didn't back down, but at the same time I'm also glad that Connor had agreed to overrule him, because that would have been paralyzing.

So the strike just went away. I imagine the public was wondering for a while what had happened. They expected me to hold hearings and various things of that nature,

which I didn't. It's one of those deals--there are far too many laws like that on the books, the kind of subsidies where they're trying to put a floor under wages without hurting anybody by doing it.

In other words, you set a fairly high wage level, but then the government pays it. The shipping industry itself doesn't. And Johnson was absolutely right; it was outrageous. But on the other hand, I think it's also true that the practice had been going on so long that it was justified to suspend it one more year. Under those circumstances it was ideal, because you had Johnson suspending and sticking to his position, but the thing being salvaged by O'Connor, which meant that the next time it came up, they got into some realistic bargaining.

G: How much contact did you have with LBJ during this last year?

R: Virtually none. I'd see him at cabinet meetings or at--which he held very few--National Security Council meetings; he held practically none of those. He'd have an occasional executive committee of the National Security Council. But there was nobody that saw much of him in that last year.

G: Did you deal largely with other aides, is that--?

R: Pretty much. With a few exceptions, what I did was just do whatever I thought ought to be done. Charlie Murphy was doing the same thing. I don't know what the other aides were doing. The only one that I think saw him all the time was Jim Jones, and Jim Jones became his major contact with the outer world at that point. Jim Jones and the various secretaries.

George Christian saw him a fair amount. One of the things that he did was he had

George Christian in on those Tuesday luncheons, you know, when he'd have lunch with [Robert] McNamara and [Dean] Rusk, and that made some sense. But he was almost like a man separated from the whole process and watching the White House being run by somebody else. I sort of had a feeling that he was out there looking down. It was a very gloomy place.

G: Okay, anything else that we haven't talked about during the--?

R: I don't know. Sam Houston [Johnson] was quite a problem during that period.

G: Did you spend a lot of time--?

R: God, yes. And--

G: A problem in what sense?

R: Oh, Sam was a real problem. He'd made some contact with somebody that had control over a huge petroleum company. What was it now? It wasn't Gulf, and it wasn't Shell, and it wasn't Standard, but it was one of the large companies. And Sam--oh, I know who it was, the young man that had inherited the money from the A&P. You know, his father--his grandfather founded the A&P food chain, and sold it out. And he'd put an awful lot of money into oil stock. Sam Houston somehow gave him the idea he might be able to tap into the petroleum reserves at Elk Hills, and what have you.

The first thing I knew, I was the contact. Well, they sent this young, very bright lawyer around; Sam brought him in. I didn't quite know what to do about it. I didn't want to get Sam in trouble with his brother, but on the other hand, I wanted to stay out of it as much as I could. The young lawyer and I got along very well. I just made it clear to him that sometimes you had families that had a problem relative, and the people just had

to sort of watch over them. And the young lawyer understood that, and he was there watching over his problem, which was this young fellow that had inherited all that money from the A&P. We got along famously.

The only trouble is that somewhere along the line--I've forgotten how this happened now, but it was one of those things where it almost got out into the public, enough so that I had to go to Johnson and let him know it was happening. I wrote him a memo on it explaining it very carefully, and he called Ed Weisl and Arthur Krim, and they made the necessary arrangements and that was that.

But Sam was quite a problem in that period. He was on the phone to me almost every day, and the worst part of it was along about two or three in the morning when I was trying to get some sleep. He was pretty much on the wagon at that point and I think that it had just killed his nerves, that he was just going around like this [gestures]. I'm told that later on he joined some fundamentalist sect and went around giving sermons on the demon rum.

Too bad about Sam. Sam had a very high-powered mind. I mean, very high-powered. If he could just have left John Barleycorn alone. He'd been fighting John Barleycorn since he was twelve years old, and he'd lost every round on points. He could think faster than Johnson could, very fast. But his trouble was that he had no basic character. He couldn't give up the sauce; he got into more woman trouble than almost anybody else I ever came across in my life.

But that last year is a mystery.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XXVII

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