INTERVIEWEE: S. DILLON RIPLEY

INTERVIEWER: T. H. BAKER

B: This is the interview with S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. Sir, would you like to just go ahead and start on Mr. Johnson and the Smithsonian?

R: My connections with President Johnson began in January, 1963 when he came for the dedication of the new Museum of History and Technology of the Institution. I was then the elected Secretary, but didn't take my post until February. Mr. Johnson spoke at that speech about his personal interest in the creation of the new Museum of History and Technology, which had cost about thirty-seven million dollars and which had been presided over in its construction by a joint congressional committee assisting the Regents of the Institution, and, as a Vice-President and a Regent, he had taken particular interest in the creation of this building, for these reasons, as well as for the fact that he had expressed a personal interest in the concept of American history being delineated on the mall. His speech was received very well, and was a very warm and friendly one to the Institution. After I began my service as Secretary in February, I remembered this speech and remembered his particular interest, and it was my pleasure on occasion to write him friendly letters from time to time about things which occurred to me which might appeal to him in connection with his interest in American history, as well as in his memories of having served as a Regent.

B: What sort of thing would that be, sir?

R: The first particular instance that I can recall came with my realization that the Court of Claims Building, which adjoins Blair House on Pennsylvania Avenue, was vacated and was going to be, presumably, reconstituted as an office building. I don't recall the exact dates of this, but in any case I was moved to write to him rather strongly to suggest that as that building had been designed, incidentally by the same architect who designed the Smithsonian building here, James Renwick, as an art gallery, by Renwick for Mr. Corcoran, it was the original Corcoran Gallery of Art, that it would have been far more efficient to turn the building back into a gallery of some sort, rather than to modify it into other purposes as an office building. In this connection, as a result of a conversation primarily with Douglas Cater of Mr. Johnson's staff, but also, at least indirectly if not actually, with Mac Bundy, who was then on President Johnson's staff. It occurred to me that a telling point could be made that the President would have from time to time VIP guests in Blair House, heads of state particularly, with whom it might be highly appropriate to make a visit next door, as it were, to the gallery and that we could demonstrate in this gallery, given lead time, as they say in the government, both the present state of the evolution of decorative arts in the United States, and also the present state of the evolution of decorative arts in that State itself. That is to say, the State the VIP came from. This idea, this concept appealed greatly to the President when I presented it to him. I suggested to him in fact that we have a walk through the old building, which he complied with and enjoyed very much. And as I can recall, the first time, one of the two first times when I really had personal contact and a chance to speak to President Johnson at some length, quietly, by myself with him, the thing that amused him very much was the suggestion that, after all, once one has spoken to

one of these heads of state, especially of some of the nations which are on the receiving line from us, about the numbers of airplanes or bombs or electron microscopes or technological gadgetry or wizardry that they want, there then, really, is more or less nothing else to say. Once we have, in effect, received the amount of the bill, and are considering how to pay the check to hand them the stuff, then there is nothing more to say. And so I said to the President all of this, and I said, "You know, it would be simply wonderful after that was all over, and at this sort of hiatus in the conversation, you could simply grab this character by the arm, rush him down into the next door building, show him the decorative arts, which, after all, are crafts made by people's hands and are original evocations of the sprit and creativity of people as people. And if you could show him his material laid out, and then our material laid out, and you could simply say, "You see, we have a heart, too!" A gesture of this sort might make a great deal of difference, it might be some way of getting down to earth and really having such a head of state realize, temporarily at least, that we are people and that we are deeply and seriously concerned in creating, in our own way, the same kinds of things which his people create, and in this sense we could reinforce these people's own sense of pride in their own ability to create things. After all, a head of state coming on his knees begging for arms and technological gadgets suffers from an implicit loss of pride in the process, and so the President looked at me and said he thought this was a tremendously imaginative thing and he was very excited and pleased and amused with the thing, and he laughed with me and sort of squeezed my arm, and thought that it was entertaining and fun and a change of pace.

My real important task with the President and Mrs. Johnson was to

introduce them to the subject of the Joseph Hirshhorn Collection, and to interest them in helping this to be acquired for the nation. And this, of course, was a pushover. This required no real effort beyond the effort of getting a moment alone with him in order to explain the importance of such an acquisition. I felt that for reasons of personal pride, quite aside from everything else, President Johnson would be delighted to be associated with a project of this sort which implied that he too, with all the stereotype notions that the public at large might have about him, coming up from humble origins in Texas with perhaps a certain sense of feeling that people in the eastern side of the sub-continent of the United States were more aware of culture than people in Texas were, he too would love to have the feeling that his own administration had had a strong impact on the cultural life of Washington. He felt, I'm sure, and it was obvious from his responses and enthusiasm, he felt a certain sense of implied inferiority to President Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy, who somehow or other had managed to steal the limelight, as it were, to act as the very embodiment of culture. And so he was delighted to think that this opportunity had come along in which he himself could play a strong personal part in attempting to lure to Washington the most important collection of contemporary art held in private hands. He backed us to the full in this concept. He was most generous with his time and effort. He organized a luncheon to meet the Hirshhorns, which I must say was an enormous success because the Hirshhorns were captivated by President and Mrs. Johnson. It was love at first sight.

B: Mr. Fortas appears to have helped some, too. Was he not at that luncheon?

R: Mr. Fortas and his wife were at that luncheon and they played their own impressive and quiet, gentle part in imparting to the Johnsons the sense

that this would indeed be an historic moment in the administration of the President. And I must say that initially, in the beginning of our attempt to interest Mr. Hirshhorn in this project of giving his collection to the nation, Roger Stevens played an absolutely fundamental part. I found out that Mr. Hirshhorn did have, indeed, had the premier collection in private hands. In fact, I was reminded that I'd read about it some years ago in a book by Aline Saarinen, The Proud Possessors. And when I cast about looking at ways in which the posture of the Smithsonian as a whole could be improved in this connection, it appeared to me to be quite impossible that, going through the legislative and appropriations route, the National Collection of Fine Arts, chartered back in 1938 as the National repository for contemporary arts of this nation in the nation's capital, would be totally incapable of mustering the muscle, the support, the enthusiasm from Congress ever to be able to buy or replace what had been more than thirty years of neglect. Therefore, the only sensible thing that seemed to me to do was to go to whomsoever it was that happened to have the outstanding collection of art of this sort and simply say, "Will you give it to us?" And this is what I did through the intervention of Roger Stevens, who knew friends of Mr. Hirshhorn and so on. And so I was able to meet Mr. Hirshhorn and simply persuade him of the enormous importance to the nation of a gesture of this sort. And then President Johnson was able to put the finishing touches to the process of soliciting Mr. Hirshorn's interest by pointing out to him that it was far more important in the nation, the Hirshhorn collection, in the nation's capital, I should say, the Hirshhorn collection, rather than, let us say, New York State or some more local interest which might be served. Because about the time that the Hirshhorns finally came, it was May, I recall, May of '66 I think, about the time the Hirshhorns came to Washington for their luncheon,

Governor Rockefeller of New York had made a very, very impressive offer to provide a special museum building as a center of a cultural complex in the new State University campus in Westchester county at purchase for Mr. Hirshhorn. And this was a powerful inducement to Mr. Hirshhorn, who lived nearby in Greenwich, Connecticut just across the state line, and to whom it would all seem terribly convenient and near. But it was President Johnson who helped me to persuade Mr. Hirshhorn that the national interest would be served by having it in Washington rather than in Westchester County.

B: Did Mrs. Johnson make a visit to the--?

R: Subsequent to this, Mrs. Johnson and--

B: Lynda.

R: Lynda made a vist to the Hirshhorn collection. I think this was a year later in the spring, a whirlwind visit which was a great success. In the meantime, President Johnson then asked one of his personal aides, Harry McPherson, to give whatever time was necessary to the Smithsonian in the efforts to persuade the members of the congressional committees that we should indeed not only accept this fantastic gift, but that we should make space available and make a building available in which to house it. Because Mr. Hirshhorn's stipulation had been, and I think in retrospect it was a perfectly fair and appropriate one, that his collection was so enormous that it required a separate building. And Mr. McPherson, at President Johnson's request, was of the most basic assistance in helping the Smithsonian to get the special legislation through. We did so, and we did so at every step helped on by the President, who took the unusual step from time to time of calling up members of the Congress to ask how things were coming along, in other words really intervened to make sure that these members understood that this was a matter of executive interest.

B: How did Mr. Johnson and Mr. Hirshhorn hit it off personally?

R: They got on very, very well. Mr. Hirshhorn has the most extraordinarily disarming quality and Mr. Johnson found him irresistible, and on the other hand Mr. Hirshhorn found President Johnson irresistible. Each one twisted each other's arms very successfully.

My first official contact perhaps with the White House had come along in the more conventional sense. That is, the Secretary of the Smithsonian is implicitly a member of commissions which have to do with the preservation of the White House. And in this, Mrs. Johnson of course, had a strong personal interest and came to be very friendly and particularly interested in whatever suggestions I might make on behalf of the Smithsonian. This continued right down throughout the administration of the President. President Johnson himself took less interest in this, although from time to time he called up and asked me to come over to the White House to advise on objects of art which friends or associates in Texas or other parts of the country were giving to the Johnsons, either for the national collections or for the Johnson library to be, or for the Johnson Foundation, or the Johnson collections at the ranch in Texas.

B: How do you find Mr. Johnson's taste in art? Does he have an interest in art or any other cultural matters?

R: I would say that the President had a friendly and genuine interest in the art with which he had grown up in the West. He loved western pictures which reminded him, as they do to all Westerners, of the past of the West, pictures of cowboys, things like Remington's pictures, local painters who painted around Fredericksburg, Texas where he had grown up and who transmitted some of the spirit of derring-do. He liked this kind of art very much. Incidentally, he like Peter Hurd's pictures very much as a typical example

of a western artist who painted the expanses, the landscapes of the West.

B: All except one of Peter Hurd's pictures.

R: Well, I'm not convinced that this was really as serious a matter as it was made out by the press. I think that the President didn't like the picture itself very much, but I am afraid that the contest between himself and Peter Hurd was largely inflated by the press and, unfortunately, the Smithsonian inadvertently got a little bit into the business by quite innocently soliciting the painting for the National Portrait Gallery, because we found that it wasn't destined to go into the White House collection. But, no, this didn't in any way affect relations either between Mr. Johnson and the Smithsonian or between Mr. Hurd and the Smithsonian. And our general feeling was that President Johnson was far too big a man to be particularly worried about this episode.

B: I must ask, since you brought it up, did you deliberately refrain from hanging it while Mr. Johnson was in office? It is not yet publicly displayed.

R: I suggested to Mrs. Johnson at a meeting in the White House when we were talking about White House things that what I would really like to show, because the Johnsons had made a point with me of saying that they didn't want representations of themselves to be exhibited in the Portrait Gallery or elsewhere, including the White House, while they were incumbents at the White House, I made the point of suggesting that a bust by Jimilu Mason which I had been to the unveiling of in the White House and which I'd had a nice conversation with President Johnson about, which I knew he liked very much and I myself liked very much. I thought it was a first-rate likeness. Really excellent. I suggested to Mrs. Johnson that we show this in the Portrait Gallery beginning the day after the Johnsons left. There was some confusion in my mind about this because I didn't realize at the

time that the bust had been commissioned for the Congress, for the Capitol, because all Vice-Presidents have themselves done in a bust, and that it was to be done in marble. The thing I liked was the bronze. And so I later found out that there was a marble bust which I had never seen which was going to the Capitol anyway. But I didn't care about that. I wanted the bronze. And Mrs. Johnson was very pleasant about it and said, well, we could do absolutely anything we wanted as far as she was concerned. If we wanted to show the bust, she knew that the President liked it, and that would be fine. I'm sorry that that later got into the press and was misinterpreted as implying that I somehow or other was trying to conceal the painting. My one idea was that, as a matter of taste, if all this hula-baloo in the press had been created about the Hurd portrait of President Johnson, it would be much nicer to show the Hurd portrait somewhat later, and not show it the same day that he was getting onto a plane, as it were, and going off with his suitcases to Texas. It would be more tactful and generous a gesture to show something that we knew he had liked. And that is in effect exactly what has happened. We have shown the bust for some time and the Hurd portrait is coming on in May, and will then be the one painting, oil painting, that we have of President Johnson for our collection.

The particular efforts that the Smithsonian made in legislation to do with our own purposes were always helped by the President. He generally was very receptive to our budget messages, he was friendly and interested, and he kept constantly referring to the part that he had played in the construction of the Museum of History and Technology. He was generally friendly and interested, through his budget bureau, with our budgets, and it was not until the stringencies of late '66 and '67 that we began having

an austerity period and found that there was little that we could do in this connection and that Mr. Johnson could not help us. He did make one stricture, and that was when the authorization was signed to erect the National Air and Space Museum, he got in touch with me and said he was perfectly willing to sign the bill, but on condition that we would understand that we would not proceed with further requests for funding until after the Vietnam war was over.

B: Incidentally, sir, this question may be totally off base, but you served in Southeast Asia in World War II. Have you ever had occasion to have your expertise in that area consulted?

R: No, not officially, that is.

B: Unofficially? You were with OSS, I believe.

R: Occasionally, unofficially. I once had the head of CIA ask me what I would do--this was in '64--about the problems in Vietnam and I simply replied if I were directing the United States policy, I would simply "go away very quietly without saying," to paraphrase the Japanese way of phrasing it. This confused the head of CIA and he said, "Well, how would you do that?" And I said, well, I think that a great deal of the war is, in effect, a war of posture developed by propaganda, and that the presence of the press and the public relations aspects of our posture in Southeast Asia play an extraordinarily dominant part in determining our policy, and if we were to de-escalate very quietly and very gently, without making a trumpeting procedure in the world press and world public opinion, I think it would have a salutary effect on South Vietnam and eventually the war would resolve itself into a kind of stalemate. That advice was not taken.

B: There has been a famous quote from a senator about, "Call it victory and

get out." Excuse me, I interrupted you.

R: We had various legislation which was introduced during President Johnson's incumbency, all of which he supported, such as the National Museum Act, which was legislated in 1966, but hit the austerity of the war so that no funds came into this legislation. The succeeding budgets for the National Collection of Fine Arts and National Portrait Gallery required no legislation, but he was most helpful on them. The question of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts President Johnson I think felt somewhat more equivocal on. I know that I, too, began to feel somewhat equivocal and somewhat disappointed that the Smithsonian was involved in being, at least nominally, the responsible, umbrella-like authority, although of course it's a separately administered bureau.

B: Is that uncertainty, sir, based on the general difficulties such centers have been having in other places?

R: My uncertainty was based on the philosophy of having a cultural center of this sort, and quite early on in my tenure as Secretary, I wrote to the director of the Center or the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Center, Mr. Stevens, and asked him what in effect was really going to happen. I felt uncertain about the Smithsonian Institution, which is basically an educational institution for the instruction of American people everywhere in their heritage, and in implicitly,their future, therefore, but which is in effect a kind of repository of the American past and therefore an indication of the American present and guideline to the future. What possible relationship there could be for the center in the field of continuing education. What were they doing about exhibits and about structuring this vast, monolithic building so that day by day hundreds of young Americans could go through it and learn something. I

didn't want to see a great sort of palace, an imperial Babylonian palace on the banks of the Potomac being used only for the occasional white tie concert. This didn't seem to me to be consistent with the purposes of the Smithsonian and I questioned the educational value of such a procedure. And I think that this helped, in a small way; certainly this was very much in President Johnson's way of thinking. It helped in a small way to interest the trustees in the concept of continuing education and of resident companies. Because when I first came there the idea was that the Center would be sort of a booking office and would merely take, first come, first served, anybody who came. Now they have adopted, I think rather strongly, the concept of having resident companies in one form or another, who would attempt by practicing, working, and therefore teaching within the confines of the Center to have a continuing vitality. But I had also hoped that the building would do much more for poor people, people who otherwise couldn't go to the theatre, in having free tickets, and having fellowships for providing experiences for underprivileged people, and it remains to be seen what we can do on this score.

B: Did you get involved in the White House Festival of the Arts?

R: Yes, we provided a good deal of the art for the White House Festival. We provided all the paintings, and graphic, and so on, arts for that. And I was a participant in the White House Festival, which was a triumph of confusion. It was very difficult to make out, as one went on through the Festival, what it was about. Some artists and writers seemed to want to use the occasion to come and vent their dislike, either of Mr. Johnson personally or of the war in Vietnam. And this I felt to be in bad taste. They had equal opportunity to editorialize or write letters to the papers about it rather then to come and confront the poor Johnsons

with this. I didn't feel that it was going to do any good, and in fact it might do harm by perhaps hardening attitudes of those around the President who felt that long-hairs were "de trop" anyway.

B: Were you asked or did you, on your own, use your influence to try to calm some of that before the Festival?

R: No, I had no intimation that this was going to happen. We were deeply involved merely in providing some of the back-up to the Festival in the form of art objects. Our National Collection of Fine Arts worked overtime, including all night the night before, in assembling objects and hanging them and so on, trying to do the best we could to help Mr. Goldman. Mr. Goldman developed slight feet of clay in this process. He didn't seem to be organized for putting on an art show himself. I dare say he hadn't had any experience in it, and when the moment came, the characteristic frenzy that often involves White House last minute phenomena meant that we had to do a great deal of the work. And that was all fine, and we didn't expect any thanks, and we didn't get any. But on the other hand, it was a considerable derogation of time on our part to something which we were not associated with having planned.

B: Did I understand your secretary that you had an appointment about now?

R: Yes, I am afraid I have to leave now.

B: Can you think of anything else quickly that could go in?

R: Well, in retrospect, I can only say that President Johnson was of enormous aid to this Institution. I think he was far more of a real friend to it than some other presidents have been, or would have been. And I sometimes have reflected on the fact that I am very lucky that I came to the Smithsonian in his incumbency, although I had not expected this, because I actually think he was basically more interested in what the Smithsonian

stands for than President Kennedy would have been.

B: An interesting point.

R: He had more of the sort of gut feeling about American history and about interest in American roots of culture, as a man who had had to work harder, who had come up a harder road, someone who was more a man of the soil, as it were. I think he was basically more attuned to the somewhat homespun interests of the Smithsonian in every way than President Kennedy might have been. But this is merely conjectural.

B: Did Mr. Johnson ever come over and just visit, just wander through?

R: Yes, he came on several occasions. He came in connection with a speech that he gave to the Encyclopedia Britannica Bi-centennial and he was just at home, just wandered around, and just had a terrific time. Mrs. Johnson of course came numerous times. Very often at the spur of the moment she would just drop in, but the President himself came and was always willing to come. He would always say, "Well, I can't come, I can't promise a thing, and I won't come," and all of that, but then at the last moment he would come. He came to the James Smithsonian Bi-centennial Celebration and gave a brilliant speech. He came to the ground-turning of the Hirshhorn Museum and gave a great speech. All of these occasions having firmly promised that he would not come. He appeared. In this fascinating quixotic way of his, he was on tap, and when he came he was utterly sincere.

B: Thank you very much, sir.

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By Dr. S. Dillon Ripley

to the

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