INTERVIEWEE: CHALMERS ROBERTS

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

DATE: APRIL 23, 1969

M: To start your recollections--let's get it on here at the beginning. You are Chalmers Roberts and your current title is chief of the national news bureau of the Washington Post, is that correct?

R: That's right.

M: You've been in that since 1959?

R: That's right.

M: But prior to that, I think most of your experience was in foreign policy reporting. Did you encounter Mr. Johnson importantly when he became a Senator? You were starting to say that was when you first knew him.

R: I started reporting foreign policy at the beginning of the Eisenhower Administration. He was Minority Leader the first two years and then Majority Leader of the Senate. So, I came into contact with him because of that fact. I had not known him as a House member because at that time he had nothing to do with foreign affairs, or very little, and I was not covering foreign affairs there and our paths had not crossed. But I did get to know him in the Senate and then of course during his period as Vice President and President.

M: It's generally considered that as a Senator particularly, his interest in foreign affairs was almost none at all. Do you think that's a fair statement?

R: My recollection of that period, that is the last six of the eight Eisenhower years when the Democrats controlled the Senate and he was the Majority Leader, is that in the matter of foreign affairs he left what the Senate did, or what he wanted the Senate to do--and it usually did what he wanted it to do--to the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. I think that in the first--I would have to look at the record to be sure, it's all on the record--the first of those years Walter George was the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee.

M: Fulbright took over in '57, I think.

R: Green was briefly chairman and then Fulbright. But my chief recollection of that period was when George was chairman of the Committee because at that time he was one of the real Southern seniors. What Johnson did then was, I remember in a number of cases, he would ask George what George wanted done--and the Committee at that time was still much more of a unitary Committee than it grew to be in Fulbright's day, something at least vaguely akin to what had been in the Vandenburg period. On a number of issues it seemed to me that Johnson had no particular feeling one way or the other. But he wanted to hold the party together in the Senate and he wanted to be, as he often said, "responsible opposition"--not the Bob Taft version of opposing for opposition's sake. His interest was in domestic matters and so he depended on George.

M: Does this apply--aren't you the author of rather a famous article regarding the decision not to go to the aid of the French in 1954?

R: Yes.

M: Does this apply here, that Johnson's position that you detailed there was really the Committee's position or somebody else's position?

R: That was a position that was a complex of reasons I guess. There was a Democratic party position in a sense. There was also a legislative position as against an executive position. At that time John Foster Dulles was Secretary of State and he was a very dominating figure. Part of it had to do with him personally, just as Johnson was the dominating figure as Majority Leader. Johnson was not the leader in that particular case. I think in that case as much as anybody, Dick Russell was. He was chairman of the Armed Services Committee and he was wary of getting into a war at that time. After all, the Korean war was barely over.

M: Less than a year.

R: But the point there in relation to Lyndon Johnson, was that he fell back and took the advice of others in the foreign field, which included George and Russell--the military side of the foreign field. He always followed Russell to a high degree on the military side and of course the military has got a lot of relationship to foreign policy.

M: And that particular instance the preeminent relationship really--

R: Yes. But the Democrats there all ended up saying--they used as an excuse to oppose our getting into the Indochina war the fact that it was essentially a unilateral thing. They ended up telling Dulles to get some allies, chiefly I think because they knew there wasn't much chance of getting any, which was an easier way than giving him a flat no. It was a more sustainable posture politically.

M: You mentioned the dominance of the figure of Dulles. Do you have any insight into the relation between the other dominant figure in the Legislative Branch, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Dulles? Did they get along closely, well, or not at all?

R: I don't know that I can really answer that question. I wonder how much they really saw of each other. Examination of the Dulles papers at Princeton might shed some light on that, which is something I've never done.

M: There is an Oral History Project for Dulles, too.

R: I've contributed to that one.

M: Have you?

R: Yes. I don't think that in the tape I did for the Dulles Oral History Project that--I don't remember making any references to Johnson. Certainly I have no strong recollection of a Johnson-Dulles relationship. It was for quite a while there, as long as George was in the Senate, it was a George-Dulles relationship. My strong impression was that Johnson left it to George. I can remember, I think fairly say, that I remember Johnson saying to me as the Majority Leader when I would ask him, "What is the Senate going to do about this or that?" He'd say, "I'm going to ask Walter George," or "We will do what Walter wants," or some expression of that kind. I have that very strong recollection in my mind.

M: You covered foreign affairs on up to 1959. Are there any other incidents or outstanding occasions in which you had a chance to see Mr. Johnson on the area you are concerned with at that time?

R: Well, I've been covering them not just to '59 but to '60.

M: I'm going to get to there. But I mean as a Senator.

R: I remember his cutting up that poor fellow in the USIA. What was his name? He was the head of the USIA who foolishly made a speech out in Honolulu--"Nick the Democrats." He was furious. I remember going to a hearing. I think it was Johnson as chairman of some appropriation subcommittee that dealt with the USIA budget, and he just took this guy to pieces. That hearing is all on the record. It would be interesting to go back and look at it. I can't remember the guy's name.

M: I can't recall his name either. I remember the incident though. It was a fairly well reported one.

R: It was one of the few cases Johnson got directly, openly, into foreign policy because the USIA was foreign policy. But it was politics--the reason.

M: Pardon me, the bipartisanship--

R: Bipartisanship didn't cover there when the other guys started cutting his party out. At least that's what I think he felt at the time.

M: How close did you get a chance to cover him or watch what he was doing when he was Vice President? He made a couple of foreign trips, I suppose might have been in your area.

R: I did not go on those trips with him. We did have people who went with him. Murray Marder went with him on one trip--my recollection and Carroll Kilpatrick went with him on--

M: I know that Carroll Kilpatrick is on our list, and I think that Murray Marder is too.

R: Marder is in Paris at the moment. They can both tell you something about how he acted on those trips, and there are a lot of very unpleasant stories about them--about how he acted. I think it was in some of those trips that he got to know Carl Rowan--one of those trips. If you talk to Carl he probably would recall that. I know Carl was with him on some of those trips. I did not make any of those trips with him.

I had one curious experience with him as Vice President which was not limited to foreign affairs. After Kennedy had been President a year everybody was writing pieces about Kennedy's first year as President, sort of the normal kind of thing. For some reason or other I latched onto the idea about writing a piece about Johnson's first year as Vice President.

I went up to see him. I arranged to see him through a friend. He was not very anxious to do it because he was trying to maintain sort of a low-profile--you know, the usual problem of vice presidents, to be loyal to the President and not say anything that would get him into trouble and so on.

But I did talk to a lot of people in the Kennedy Administration and about Johnson, especially what, how he acted at the National Security table and in the foreign field probably more than in the domestic field, I guess. Then I went up to see him in that fancy office he had in the Capitol, the old District committee room. I talked to him for a couple of hours, I guess, and I had an appointment down at the State Department, and I finally said to him, "Well, I

think, Senator--" or something like this, "I've run out of questions." A good deal of it was a Johnson monologue, of course, and "I've got to go down to the State Department." He said, "Wait a minute, I'll call my car, get my chauffeur to take you down." So he called this guy and sent me down to the State Department in the Vice President's car.

I did whatever I had to do and I came back to the office after lunch and the phone rang and it was Johnson. He said, "Chalmers, I don't think you've finished all the questions you had. You better come back up here and talk some more." So I got in the cab and went up to talk to him for another couple of hours. Well, you know, some questions, as was his want and his right, he never answered. But that's not the first time that's happened. Anyway, it was exhaustive, he did make a lot of time available to me; obviously he wanted as good an impression as possible.

M: I remember that piece. But are there impressions that are left over that you didn't write?

R: After I wrote the piece, which ran in the Outlook Section, it created an absolute freeze. Johnson was furious about it. He called up the guy who had been sort of the intermediary in arranging the appointment and said something to the effect, "Well, thanks a lot, buddy." And Liz Carpenter, I remember running into somewhere and she just turned her back on me. I suddenly realized that I was getting this big freeze and I couldn't figure out why. I went back and got the piece out to see what the hell I'd written that offended him so, and for the life of me I couldn't--I thought it was a rather favorable piece. It said

something to the effect that he was having a hard time making the transition from the Legislative to the Executive Branch and that his heart was really still on the Hill, which I think was true enough. But it infuriated him.

One time I was out at a party at Jim Webb's house, he was head of NASA then. Lady Bird came in and she just let me have it.

M: About the same piece?

R: About the same piece. Finally she said, "What would you have us do, Mr. Roberts? How should the Vice President conduct himself? You obviously don't approve of the way he's been conducting himself," was the tone of the message. Well, I was not about to give any prescription. And he walked in and he just gave me the cold shoulder. Well, that was my entire relationship with him as Vice President.

Then he suddenly became President and after he'd been President--let's see that was November, I guess--in the spring of '64 when the election was coming up, I went over to see him in the White House for the first time to talk about the election and the campaign. He couldn't have been more pleasant and jovial and forthcoming--

M: The thaw had come somewhere in between.

R: It was a completely different thing. He was now President of the United States.

M: Do you remember the consensus of the Kennedy people at the time you wrote that piece--before you go on farther?

R: Yes.

M: What kinds of things did the Kennedy people say about him when you were asking about his first year as Vice President?

R: It depended which Kennedy people you talked to. It was apparent, as I think the story indicated, that Jack Kennedy tried to bring him out, give him a chance to talk, get him informed about the job, just the thing any President--since Roosevelt's death--every President has been conscious of the fact that he might die in office and he better tell his guy something.

I think people like Ted Sorenson and Mac Bundy were not at that point hostile to Johnson. They realized that the President was trying to bring him in. Everybody was aware of the politics of how he got on the ticket and I was too because I'd been at the Los Angeles convention. Most of them--those people were rather sympathetic. They did--there was a certain degree of complaint that he wasn't speaking out.

M: A strange complaint about him.

R: It was. But you know, that's a hell of a job as everybody who has had it has testified. I did not then run into the business between Bobby Kennedy and Johnson because that was a political thing and what I was looking for was, you know, what was Johnson actually doing in terms of hard problems. I have to go back on it. I think that piece would be reflective or better than I can recall now of what people were saying then.

M: The Bobby animosity allegedly dates from, at least, the 1960 convention if not before, is that--

R: Well, it certainly dated from the convention. That's true.

M: So far as you know, the various accounts of that which involved the Bobby and Johnson relationship are accurate?

R: I was there with Phil Graham, who was then our publisher, and as Teddy White has published in his last "Making of the President," Graham's memo that he wrote afterwards was substantially the account that I remember Phil telling me at the time. Phil was a great friend of both Johnson and Kennedy, and he loved the role of sort of being a broker to put this ticket together. He was a political animal himself.

But I think the Bobby thing--now there has been some dispute about whether that's a correct account, and different people have had subsequent accounts. What the truth of it is, I suppose we'll never know what it is because the one guy who knew was murdered--Jack Kennedy. So the record has to rest where it is, I guess.

M: After Mr. Johnson became President, you mentioned your first visit over there. How much personal contact is there between someone in your job and the man who is President at any given time? Do you call him for long personal--

R: It varies extensively. It varies with Presidents, with reporters and newspapers. After all, from my view, when the guy reaches the White House his relations with the press are composed, first of all, of his prior relationships. As Jack Kennedy once said in a press conference when Charlie Bartlett was being assaulted for a piece he and Stu Alsop had written in the Saturday Evening Post critical--I think it was a piece about Stevenson--"It's very hard to make new friends when you're President." God knows that's true. So I think each President brings with him a recollection of some reporters who he liked or he thought

were fair or decent or helpful or whatever his measurements were. Those friendships sometimes continue and sometimes they disintegrate.

M: Yes. That's kind of strange. Johnson had such good press relations as a Senator and ultimately such bad ones as President.

R: I don't think his press relations were all that good as a Senator. I think as a Senator he was in a very powerful position. A journalist quickly discovers that a divided government, that is where the Executive and Legislative are controlled by different parties, is something of an ideal situation from a journalistic standpoint, because you have a political conflict built in there. Therefore the legislature--in that case and it's going to be true with the Nixon Administration--you have legislative leaders that the President of the other party has got to tell a certain number of things to. They are not as protective as they would be if he were the President of their party because they don't have the same political interest in protecting him. The first two years of the Eisenhower Administration, when Wiley was the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, was very different from the other years when the Democrats beginning with George as chairman because you have this built in conflict. As I say, journalistically this is always a useful thing--though Johnson was powerful and everybody paid attention to him because of that fact. He not only quickly manipulated the Senate, but he was the other pole of power in Washington from the White House. So he had a lot of people seeing him all the time and I don't think they loved them particularly. I know the photographers used to complain bitterly about it because he, you know, had this great vanity about being photographed only from one profile. He used to kick the photographers around there. I've

heard him up on the Hill in those days. A guy who knew him quite well in those days is Sam Schaefer of Newsweek. If you want to go back with Johnson's relations with the press when he was Majority Leader I think Sam would be a useful guy to talk to.

M: We'll put him down. I'm sure he's not on the list now.

R: You know, how many close relationships he had, I don't know because I was not at the Senate regularly. He certainly had a close relationship with Phil Potter, Baltimore Sun, which he carried into the White House. The degree to which it cooled off in his Presidency, you can ask Phil about.

M: William White I suppose goes back to that time.

R: Bill White goes back to that time and of course Bill became his chief flag bearer as a columnist. But they are limited in most cases. When a guy gets to the White House, he brings along some of this baggage personal relationships--not just with the press but all kinds.

But then he's in a different situation. He may have been a friend of a columnist and a reporter for the Baltimore Sun and the publisher of the Washington Post, somebody in the New York Times and what not of the Texas papers that have known him intimately longer, but he's got new areas of interest. He sees--you know, where are the papers, where are the networks--especially with the development of radio and television news especially--who are the people who are going to help him and hurt him in his estimation? So he begins to make new friends or new relationships.

Now, he never saw me, I'm sure, because he thought Chalmers Roberts is a great guy, you know no matter how much he'd tell you this. I represented a piece of the Washington Post to him and the Washington Post is read by everybody who counts in Washington every morning. [If] we socked him with an unfavorable story on page 1, that meant something to him or a favorable story meant something to him. So he wanted to have relationships--and he's no different from any President, although they do it differently--with the people who had something to do with that. I think that's where my relationship--I would put it in that category.

M: Nevertheless, it involved personal contact at some point. Did Mr. Johnson frequently call in people from the important papers like yourself and Phil Potter?

R: I don't know how much you've been through things like his engagement book. Who he saw I'm sure is all in the Johnson Library in minute detail. I have a lot of memos of various sessions that I had with him--some alone, some with Carroll Kilpatrick, or Ben Bradlee and some with a group. He started out by having sort of groups.

M: Yes, you get these stories of the marathon group things.

R: You know, we started out walking around the back yard and the White House bit, which was a confusing kind of thing because everybody couldn't hear. It was fun but silly.

M: Hard to stop and write it down.

R: And very difficult to handle. But then it got more formalized. He had a sort of collection of what he called "bureau chiefs" that he would have in. This was especially true during that election campaign, '64, when he would take us up in that Oval Room upstairs and Jack Valenti

would bring out all the polls to show how he was going to carry this state and that. I was writing a lot of politics during that election--as I do in election years, especially presidential election years. But there was always a foreign policy content in it, 'cause there's always some crisis of some kind. Of course, as Viet Nam grew, that grew more and more. Those things were organized by--I'm not sure whether Salinger started that when he was still at the White House or whether it was after Salinger.

M: Reedy--during Reedy's--

R: It was Reedy. I think it was Reedy, chiefly during the Reedy period and George could tell you how those things came to be organized.

M: Did he take a personal interest in the sense that he--you mentioned your earlier piece where he gave you the freeze after you had written a story--does he still do that? Or did he call you about stories you wrote, for example?

R: My recollection, he only called me once about something. He called me at home on Sunday afternoon about some story which I'd have to go back and find some notes about it. It seemed to me a rather inconsequential point. He seemed to just want to chat about it.

M: He wasn't flailing you?

R: No. He'd read something I'd written in the Sunday paper and he wanted to add a point to it. He was not unhappy with it; he just wanted to get more juice out of the orange, I gather.

But he used to call Russ Wiggins a good deal--Russ was the editor of the paper--about editorials and news policy in general. And of course

he talked to Kay Graham.

M: I was going to ask you if that caused a bad feeling or any problems for the working reporters, the fact that they knew he was a good friend of Katharine Graham or that he was a good friend of Russell Wiggins.

R: I don't know that it caused any problems. I don't ever remember hearing that he ever called anybody and said, "Don't print this or don't print that." It did happen once with Jack Kennedy who called about some particular story that he'd heard that another reporter here had gotten hold of. He made a great national interest plea about not printing it and we didn't print it. I think in retrospect, he much overstated it, as frequently is the case, but it's pretty hard to turn down a President who does that.

M: That's an interesting line of thought.

R: Yes. But I don't ever know if that happened with Johnson. It's true that Johnson did tell me or these groups, or I'm sure both Russ Wiggins and Kay Graham, on occasion things that were going on which he said, "Now, you can't print that." He said that to me, "I'll tell you this but you can't print it." On occasion when I would go over to see him, he'd say, "How are we talking."

I'd say, "Whatever you want--background or--"

He'd say, "No, no background. That means you'll print it--absolutely off the record."

Well, you have to agree with what the President says. But I mean, what does that mean? There's really no point in his talking--the President telling you about the background of say Viet Nam or the Middle East or something he's doing, or even political matters, except to

influence your thinking about it. Otherwise, he's wasting his time and he hasn't got that much time. God knows that he's spent a hell of a lot of time talking to reporters. So I always thought there was sort of confusion in his mind sometimes about these terms.

You'll find this, generally. Government people say, "Off the record," and they really don't mean "off the record" in the sense nothing is usable. What they mean is that they want to be hidden. The fact that they told you or that--they want it sort of to seep out to their benefit. That's the way government works. He spent a tremendous amount of time with reporters. I think it gradually slid downhill over the years as his press relations got worse and the credibility gap got underway, and the war got more unpopular.

M: In the credibility gap, did he to your knowledge intentionally mislead or lie to reporters to suit his purposes?

R: I think all Presidents, like Secretaries of State and other officials, do what, I guess, most people do. They tell you things selectively. You know, any event or any fact is subject usually to several interpretations anyway. In fact, lots of times there are meetings in government and you talk to three people who are at a meeting and they will all give you different accounts--accounts at least of variance on some important points. And I'm sure they all think that that's what happened. It is like people watching an automobile accident; witnesses can't agree. You get the same kind of thing in government and Presidents have their way of looking at it.

They have selective judgment and there's always the problem of what they want to see there, and what Johnson wanted to believe about Viet Nam. I think part of his great problem about Viet Nam was that he really never understood what kind of thing this was. He was convinced that it had a relationship to the past, had a relationship in the sense that Rusk used to talk about Munich, and Europe, and that relationship.

These are things--sort of the baggage he brought with him, that he went back to pre-Pearl Harbor. And I know how he used to talk about the draft was only saved in the House by one vote and he drummed up that one vote. Well, whether that was true or not about his role in the one vote, the incident he never forgot. That kind of thing and his association with FDR and Roosevelt's problems with the isolationists, all those things are in his mind, conditioned his way of approaching this problem.

It's not easy to say that a man lies about anything till you've tried to put him in the framework of how he got to think about a particular problem the way he did. You get so you end up psycho-analyzing, you know, public officials--which can also be dangerous. I think he did lie sometimes, yes, and most governmental officials do sometimes. Some of them are careful that they don't overtly lie.

God knows they don't tell you everything, and they can't. There's a basic built-in hostility or, as the lawyers call it, an adversary proceeding between the press and government, and that's the way it ought to be.

Just like a good lawyer argues his case on his strong points, so does the government with the public and the press, as the technique at getting at the public.

Johnson's problem was his obsessive secretness, secretiveness that he had which so much has been written about. He's terribly suspicious of people. He made remarks to me about people, about foreign leaders, that if I had printed them verbatim it would have created international scandals. But I always respected--that kind of a confidence is useful to me to see what his frame of mind was. But you can't say that he said that Prime Minister X is the kind of jerk that he said he was. You know, you dress these things up in barn yard language frequently.

M: That's interesting though. He's suspicious and secretive and yet he'll make a comment like that, trusting your good judgment in not letting it get to the public. It's sort of a contradiction there.

R: There is. I think there must be a compulsion on people in that job. They must feel hemmed in as they have all said in one form or another from the beginning, by the White House. Every guy wants to get to Camp David or Florida or Cape Cod. They want to get out of the building every now and then. It's claustrophobic apparently, although Johnson used to talk about the pleasures of it. You know he'd say, "I don't get caught in the traffic jam coming to work in the morning. There are certain benefits living in this place. In two minutes I can go into my bedroom and take a nap," all of which is true. One time we had a group luncheon over there of Post people, about a dozen people, in the upstairs dining room. He took us all through the bedrooms--

M: He liked to do that.

R: He liked to do that. That was the only time I've been in some of those rooms upstairs. Well, why does he do that sort of thing? I don't know. You can get all the psychiatrists you want to to try to explain it. He had a feeling of, I guess any President who comes in from Vice President--the death of a President, especially under the circumstances that he did--feels a necessity to be President, to put his mark on it and so on. Part of it is to show that he's human and part of this you do in your relations with the press. I wandered off the subject there.

M: That's quite all right. You've seen lots of presidents now from one vantage point or another. Do you think generally that what's called the credibility gap in the Johnson Administration was worse or substantially worse with Johnson than it was with Kennedy or Eisenhower or Truman?

R: I think it hurt him more than anything comparable hurt the others. Each one of these presidents--I came here in the first year of the Roosevelt Administration, 1933, when I got out of college. Each of these presidents has had hsi own kind of credibility gap, although the term was not used in the Kennedy years. It was called managing the news, and all Presidents try to manage the news, and it's inescapable. They must in their self-protection. The question is how you do it and the impression you leave. Eisenhower did it effectively because Hagerty happened to be just the right guy for Press Secretary, and Eisenhower gave him a certain amount of room. And Eisenhower was the the father figure that gave him a certain latitude that no one has had since Roosevelt--which Kennedy didn't have, Truman didn't have, Johnson

didn't have, and Nixon doesn't have. That's just the luck of the game, how you get there. They all fight to get to the job and then they all complain about it after they have it.

M: How important are the Press Secretaries in this? Did Johnson make some mistakes in appointments as far as Press Secretaries?

R: I think Press Secretaries are very important. Hagerty was in many ways the best that I've known. But again, each guy is only as good as his principal will let him be.

Johnson ended up with George Christian. If he had had Christian from the day he became President, he probably would have been a lot better off. Salinger was a hangover, a holdover, which I suppose was inescapable given the circumstance. But he was, you know really not a Johnson guy. The trauma of the thing was there. Reedy was just not up to it, and he used to kick George around when he was up on the Hill and everybody knew that. But Christian--he found in Christian the right guy.

M: But you left out the one that's the key there. That's Moyers. That's when the relations began to get bad.

R: Moyers was a different type. Moyers tried to be more than a Press Secretary. Remember at the end he had a back office where he was sort of talking policy with people. I remember going in there and talking to him about foreign policy issues, which he didn't really know much about. But he was fascinated by "the new kid with a new toy" business. Johnson--when Moyers was his Press Secretary he used to talk about him, "He's just like my son," and everything. And after Moyers left, he just used to rip him up and down verbally. That kind

of thing never helped Johnson. He had a habit of doing that. When people left they'd had it, and he couldn't contain himself on it.

But if he'd had Christian from the beginning, perhaps a lot of his problems wouldn't have happened. On the other hand, maybe Christian might not have been as good at the beginning. Maybe it was just the experience of coming in after seeing the pitfalls of the other three. But he took Christian into his confidence apparently in a way--well, he did Moyers too I guess to a high degree up to some point. I don't think he ever did really with Salinger or Reedy. But a Press Secretary is important. There's no doubt about it.

M: There's been a lot of talk since Herb Klein has been appointed about the coordination of press officers around town. Did the Johnson Administration do that badly? Did that contribute to their troubles?

R: They tried to do it just like Herb Klein is trying to do it. I think you can, and should, do this to some degree. There should be some rapport among the Press Secretaries, especially say in the foreign field between the White House, State, Defense, the chief agencies, domestic field now in this urban area and so on. But there's a limit to that. I think each President, of his Press Secretary, has tried to do it to some degree or other, but there's a limit to it.

M: How did the working press combat the secretiveness that the Johnson Administration tried to put up? Were there centers around town, various shops where you could go to evade this super secret attempt that they tried--

R: One of the problems with Johnson was that he had this phobia about appointments. For example, if word leaked out that he was going to

appoint A to job B, he'd hold the appointments up or sometimes not even make them. I suppose that he would deny to his dying day that this was true but there is no doubt that everybody in the government thought it was true. So, whether it is true or not is immaterial.

I think it was true but--I remember one State department official who was appointed to an ambassadorship. We ran his picture on the front page saying that he was going to be appointed to this ambassadorship and Johnson went through the roof, and he held it up for weeks. It was supposed to be announced the next couple of days and the guy involved thought, you know, "My career is ruined. I'll never get the job now." It was a job he'd been hoping for. He was sore at us for doing it and in the end he got the job when the furor died down. There is a great deal of that--that kind of pressure--and of course, trying to find out who leaked it afterwards, how much Johnson did that I'm not sure. But you always hear about inquiries being made about stories.

M: That makes it rough on you and your sources.

R: It makes it difficult and makes people clam up. On the other hand in the foreign field, when both Mac Bundy and Walt Rostow were running the White House foreign policy shop they were pretty accessible, depending on the nature of the problem, and he let them be accessible. Rostow used to say that, "Johnson--the President has told me to talk to you people." On substantive issues you got at people; and knew what was going on. Again they didn't always tell you everything; at least you could get at them.

M: You weren't blocked from the proper channels?

R: No.

M: Moyers, for example, has said publicly since Johnson left office that there was a fairly widespread number of people who opposed the Viet Nam policy in the government. Was there kind of an antiadministration network that fed things for the press?

R: It depends on what point or what period of time he's talking.

M: I think he was saying about early '67.

R: It increased but I don't think back in '65 when he went in really massively into Viet Nam except to the degree that George Ball was talking against it that there are not many people who can stake out a claim that they stood up to the President and said, "This is a mistake. It's gonna be a mistake." Maybe some people can claim this. As it went on, yes, there was more muttering and more doubts in different levels. Rusk could feel it in his own department and Johnson could feel it in the government, I'm sure. The press naturally was looking for these people, not to put them on the spot but to find out, you know, what their arguments were, why they were against, what reasons they were giving and how much influence they were having with the President.

M: That point, were they getting their advice to President Johnson that you could tell? Or did they think they were?

R: Both Bundy and, of course, Rostow always contended that they put before the President all the alternatives. Obviously, anybody in that job is going to say that, and I suppose anybody in that job believes it, that he did. How you could ever determine whether this is true or not I don't know. I suppose if you had all the NSC papers and all the working papers and the notes from all the Tuesday lunches, assuming

that they are complete--which I'm not sure is true--you might be able historically to go back and determine whether in fact that was true. But the telphone has destroyed so much in terms of records that it's very difficult I think to make a hard judgment. I think that there was probably too limited an approach to Johnson.

I did hear stories of people who had come back from Viet Nam, both press people and government people of lower level, whose views I thought were worth listening to when I talked to them, who some people tried to get them in to see the President and he wouldn't see them. Apparently, it got to the point where he didn't want to talk to any newspaper people on Viet Nam because he must have felt they were all against the war and they just wanted to lecture him. He didn't want to listen to it. Whether that's really true or not is very hard to tell because I don't know who he saw. He saw thousands of people who never appeared on the appointment list, you see. When you go historically through the list of who was there and for how long, you can make a better judgment. I don't know when that's going to be made public.

M: Yes. There's even another thing too. A lot of people might have said to you, or to any reporter, that they had doubts about our policy but they were not even trying to say it. Did you get the impression, maybe that it wasn't being stopped at the Rostow shop necessarily but maybe it wasn't even being bucked up to the Rostow shop because they thought the President's line was--

R: I suspect that that's true in some cases. It's very difficult to talk back to a President.

M: Particularly when you know what he thinks.

R: When you think you know what he thinks. That's part of the problem the guy has of being trapped there. I remember one time I went to see him, and I can't recall offhand what brought it out. He was talking about some group or somebody who'd been in to see him. I was sitting in his office talking to him alone and he turned to me and he said, "You don't come in here all shaking when you talk to me," shaking his hands, indicating that somebody--I don't know what it was--but somebody obviously had come in to see him who was scared to death and was just in a tremor. And he had no respect for this guy. What the point was or what the incident was I have no idea but he bounced it off me that way--which just gave me sort of an insight for a moment to the problem the President has of getting people to come and level with him even to what they think. It's not easy to do it, and he was not an easy guy to talk to.

M: Particularly when you were disagreeing with him.

R: Especially if you were disagreeing with him. I did find, I think, that he got to be a much better listener than he was credited with being.

Yet, once he bawled me out, indirectly, for something--it shows you the limits of the press in a way. Bob McNamara had gone to a dinner, I think at the Metropolitan Club, that a group of newspaper people had had for him--off-the-record background dinner. I was there, and in the course of this dinner, McNamara was asked whether it made any sense to use nuclear weapons in Viet Nam. He tried to give what I'm sure he--I think he had no intention whatsoever of using nuclear

weapons. But he tried to give an answer that left the option but he did badly, and he left the flavor that he might be considering it. Now that's a rough version of it. But it appalled some of us there that he would do this. I remember Bob Donavan, the Los Angeles Times, was sitting next to me and we were saying, "My God, how could he do that!" I asked a couple further questions about it in the sense to try to give him a chance to bail himself out of this thing because I could visualize people writing stories saying, "Administration Has Not Ruled Out Using NUKES," you know--which was true but not really true. Anyway, McNamara is very stubborn about these things and he stuck where he was.

Well, I went over to see Johnson a day or two after that incident. McNamara came up in the conversation and the President said, "Bob told me he'd seen you fellows the other night."

I said, "Yes, Mr. President. I thought he got himself into a little bit of trouble by--" In fact stories were written but not as badly as they could have been. I think we all gave him the benefit of the doubt, probably. Anyway, I said, "I think he got himself into some trouble by the way he handled this nuclear weapons thing."

Johnson said, something to the effect, "Well, you know, it's ridiculous to talk about nuclear weapons in this kind of war. Nobody's going to do it, [but] you're not going to tell Hanoi that." Some such conversation.

Several days later, another reporter was in and he came out afterwards and said, "Johnson says, you're trying to play President."

I said, "What the hell do you mean?"

He said, "Well he said you came in and gave him a lecture about Bob McNamara and nuclear weapons. He says, Chal Roberts is trying to play President now." So this is the kind of thing that he did. Just as he used to--to me and others--talk about General [Joseph] Alsop and General Morse [Wayne Morse]. He'd say, "General Morse wants me to pull out. General Alsop wants me to bomb China," with this heavy sarcasm he could put on.

M: I take it though that the relations with Alsop improved substantially before the end of the Administration.

R: Alsop was supporting him. That was as simple as that--supporting what he was doing essentially.

M: That became the circle that was within the favored--

R: You were either for him or against him, you know--that's over-simplified. When he felt he was fighting for his life there before he finally took himself out--that last few months and the beginning of the political campaign--and even after he took himself out on March 31st last year like other Presidents he looked with favor on those who were writing things to support him. Roosevelt did the same thing.

M: Did you go to Viet Nam?

R: I was out there at one point, two years ago, for about six weeks.

M: I wonder if you could comment briefly on the way the government press operation there was managed. It has been the subject of considerable discussion about how thoroughly they reported the facts to the newsmen there, how one-sided they were--

R: I hesitate to do that, 'cause I wasn't there long enough. You can find many people who were there longer than I was who have a much better basis in fact of giving you a judgment. I think the problem was more here than there--was more in the Pentagon and the White House. I think part of the problem was McNamara tried to computerize the war, and it's just not subject to that. The statistics got to the point where nobody believed anything.

The only statistics I believe anymore are the number of American dead because that's the only statistic that is not capable of being phonied. Nobody believes the figures of how many Communists are killed, plus or minus a 100 percent. Even that, of course, is important. But the body count business became so disreputable because so many reporters were out in the field and saw what actually was happening. It wasn't that people were lying; it was no commander is going to risk more lives to do something like this just because Washington wants a body count. So they took and make a guess. That's the kind of thing that happened but the reason it happened was because Washington was pressing for this thing. And they will tell you--a guy out there--that the people in Saigon, the Embassy people, as well as the military people, were constantly being asked for reports that were favorable.

M: Good news.

R: You know, they didn't say, "Send us good news," not that crass. But the way you say it or ask it or form your question has that implicitly in it. And that's the way it was read. The problem I think was far less out there than here.

M: That's important.

R: That's the end of the tail of the dog.

M: What about the press? The Administration always defended themselves or tried to charge that the press was saying things different than they were saying by sort of a refuge to the claim, "Well, the press was out there sitting in the bar," and so on.

R: This started in the Kennedy years initially. I think there's some truth in it, and there isn't some truth to it. I think basically when somebody goes back, when the war is over--or even now--nobody has really, that I know of--to examine what was written out there--I don't mean just by [David] Halberstam and the people in that group in that incident but the day-to-day wire service copy, which is what most people hear and what our people wrote, the Times people and all the other correspondents, I think they would get, you know, 60, 70, 75 percent in retrospect right and what the administration was saying was 30 or 35 percent right.

M: So the press was doing a better job.

R: I think the press is unquestionably doing a better job in this. And the fact that they were drawing different conclusions from the same things--or seeing different things, drawing different conclusions--did create a problem for both sides out there. Then it was reflected back here.

M: You just came back from Paris, too. Did you go to Paris while Johnson was still in office?

R: No, I went right after inauguration.

M: I suppose this is as good a summary question, particularly relevant to our project although it may not be too relevant to Lyndon Johnson, that you could comment on. You mentioned the idea that telephones have taken away a lot of the records. How thoroughly is the full

story reported of what goes on in Washington?

R: I think that, as a generalization, I would say that the drift of events is well reported. The details are frequently inaccurate and sometimes downright wrong. Rusk used to say, "There are really no secrets in the government." That's true, but it's not true. It's true in the sense that there are no secrets. For example there was no secret that Johnson was escalating the war without his ever saying so. There's no secret today about Nixon's trying to disengage from the war without his saying that. Where the inaccuracies are are the details of the steps up the ladder then, or down the ladder now. The problem is to give the readers, most of whom don't care about the details and haven't got time for them or can't comprehend them, at least to give them the drift, the direction. I think in that sense the reporting has been basically correct.

Where we fall down is the details and a lot of that is government secrecy. Some of it's sloppy reporting, some of it is--we all, including myself, have done this--we have taken one person's word or two people's word as being worth more than their word. You know, how do you find out when you have a situation as you did in the last part of the Johnson Administration, between Rusk and Clifford, which they were both denying that there was any difference between them when there was an obvious difference between them.

M: That apparently is going to become sort of a cause celebre, too.

R: That's not the only case of that but that was a rather obvious one. Rusk even accused me of trying to psychoanalyze him, which I guess was a fair criticism, you know. But that, I guess, is part of the job.

I think that over the years the press has given the broad picture. We didn't probably--you'd have to go back and look at what was printed--we probably didn't give enough of a picture soon enough about the escalation in Viet Nam, just as we didn't before the Bay of Pigs about what Kennedy was doing. In retrospect it's a lot clearer but the secretiveness of the government in both cases--Kennedy, CIA thing, in the Bay of Pigs; Johnson in the escalation here where he didn't want to go to Congress and ask for a declaration of war and went through the Tonkin Gulf resolution business--these things did obscure to some degree the real truth of what was going on.

That's not to say that Johnson ever sat down and said, "Now, I'm going to do this the rest of my term. I'm going to escalate the war up the ladder like this." Because that's not the way it happened. I mean we fell into this war by accident, in the first place. The whole history of American involvement in IndoChina for twenty-five years has been this happenstance stuff. That's the tragedy of it. So people who think Johnson secretly plotted this whole thing out, don't know what they're talking about, in my view. But I think along the way he did manage to hide enough stuff, and we didn't manage to dig out enough stuff to make it as clear as we should have. And if what happened in Congress and the business of people like Fulbright now beating themselves over the head, you know, saying, "mea culpa, I should have known better," is some reflection of that because the press didn't--They're right; they were wrong then, they didn't do their homework on the Hill and that's a frequent problem. It's not just the press; the Cong is at fault there.

M: Are there any generalizations or incidents other than these about the Johnson years or Mr. Johnson that you feel should be put down?

R: I don't know. Is he going to sit down and read all these--listen to all these tapes?

M: We don't work for him, we work for the University of Texas. We have physical control over the tapes here. So, I rather doubt that he will although I know that some of the people who've known him for a good number of years have a sort of a picture of him getting up every morning and listening to some of the tapes.

R: I imagine he's going to write his own memoirs first.

M: That's right, I'm sure. Well, mainly, you know anecdotal type things we're interested in hearing and one of the problems is that critics are less willing to talk frequently than friends are--which can skew the project. Unfortunately, some of the people who have declined to talk to us are people that are known critics and it creates a problem.

R: I think that a good example of press problems is Walter Lippmann. Here is a distinguised American who laid down sort of the basic rule for the press and that is "Don't get too close to public officials. Don't become captives." He violated his own rule in my view, and Johnson got him into it. I suppose it was inescapable. You remember that famous incident where, I think Walter had written about it--he had Johnson over there for seven hours or something one day. I'm sure Walter feels that he was betrayed because he seemed to be taking his advice or asking for it and listening to it respectfully. It's something from Lippmann's standpoint which was completely contrary, so he'd

been doubled-crossed in effect. This created a real attitude of bitterness there, that kind of thing. From Johnson's standpoint he thought he was being effective but he was being counter-productive. And that's the old problem of Presidents trying to, you know, manipulate the press, if you want to use that word, or at least trying to get a grip on them. Some are better at it than others. Kennedy got away with a lot of murder just because of the charm he put on.

M: Anything you'd like to add? Don't let me cut you off.

R: No, I think that's about enough.

M: We appreciate all your time.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By Chalmers M. Roberts

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, Chalmers M. Roberts, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder, and all literary property rights, will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by terms of this instrument available for research as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

3. A revision of this stipulation governing access to the material for research may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States, or his designee, if it appears desirable.

4. The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Signed Chalmers M. Roberts

Date June 28, 1972

Accepted [signature]
Archivist of the United States

Date Oct 6 1973