INTERVIEW I

DATE: January 14, 1970

INTERVIEWEE: CHARLES ROBERTS

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: Mr. Roberts' office, Washington, D. C.

Tape 1 of 3

F: Mr. Roberts, you were in Dallas at the time of the assassination, November, 1963.

R: Right.

F: Did you have any insights as to the depth of the Texas political problem that brought Mr. Kennedy there, or did you think this was just another fund raising swing?

R: No. We were all aware before we left Washington that the President and Vice President thought they were in trouble, that they were going to need Texas again in 1964 and that they were in trouble there, that there was a good opportunity for fund raising, that there were deep splits in the party. Our impression was that Vice President Johnson had talked a rather reluctant Kennedy into making the trip. Kennedy felt he needed to do it because he knew how important Texas had been in 1960 and how important it could be again. So it was of course a political trip. There were some inspections of space facilities at Houston and a couple of things like that as window dressing.

F: Previous to this time you hadn't known Mr. Johnson in more than just a sort of casual newsman, political. . .

R: No. As a White House correspondent, I had seen him come in and out. I had seen the President send him off on trips. . .

F: You hadn't made any of the trips?

R: No. But I should add that before the Texas trip we were well aware of the feud between [Ralph] Yarborough and [John] Connally, and everybody was looking for those angles on that trip.

F: Yes. Did you get any firsthand observance of the troubles with Yarborough and Johnson in this matter of seating in cars and so on, or was this all relayed?

R: Well, I saw Yarborough at one point refuse to get in a car, but at this moment I honestly can't tell you whether it was in Dallas that morning of the motorcade or whether it was over in Fort Worth.

F: I think it was previous to Dallas.

R: See, we spent the night in Fort Worth, and I remember seeing him standing there arguing with, I believe, Larry O'Brien, but at this point I don't remember where, and I certainly didn't overhear any of the argument.

F: I know you've been over this previously and you may be even a little sick of it, so you just put me off anytime the question is too repetitious and anytime you feel you're sufficiently on record elsewhere. But let's pick up the story, then, with that morning in Dallas. You came over from Fort Worth. How did the correspondents come over, by bus or plane?

R: We came by plane, got there a little ahead of the presidential plane, as did Vice President Johnson. So we saw Kennedy and Jackie get off of Air Force One; Johnson and Connally and, I guess, Yarborough were there in line--the people who greeted them as they

came off the plane, although many of them had been in Fort Worth that morning or had been with us the day before. One thing I started to mention a minute ago: Besides it being a political story, we had some feeling--not foreboding--but a lot of people were looking for signs of hostilities--what with Dallas being a center of right wing reaction.

F: Yes.

R: Anybody who says, at least any correspondent who says that the possibility of an assassination had crossed his mind is, I think, indulging in hindsight. But we were looking for signs of hostility and we saw a few. Of course, there was the Dallas Morning News of that morning, with a very unfriendly ad. We saw signs like, "Yankee Go Home" and so forth. But the crowd at the airport was mostly friendly. Kennedy, at the airport, would go down the chain link fence shaking hands, a thing that Johnson later improved on and made into much more of a production. He went down the fence with Jackie, and the Vice President just stayed in the background there completely, although it was his home state. I remember I asked Jackie how she liked campaigning, as they got to the end of the fence. I had walked, for some reason, the whole length of it with them--and she said, in that sort of breathless way of hers, "It's wonderful, wonderful."

Then we got in the cars and started downtown. Except for a few signs on the way, it was a fantastically friendly crowd.

There was a local reporter riding on the White House press bus. The only discussion I remember about possible crowd hostility was as we were going down Main Street, he remarked, "They won't let anybody get within ten feet of him today"--meaning Kennedy--"because of the Adlai Stevenson thing."

F: Yes.

R: Stevenson had been spat upon in Dallas a couple of weeks before. This didn't turn out to be true, because along Main Street people surged out into the street and actually stopped the motorcade and pretty well swarmed all over the car, a thing that Kennedy always encouraged. He would actually slow down the motorcade. He loved to see a crowd get him behind schedule because then the next day the papers would say it took him an hour to drive through downtown Dallas or wherever. Anyway, we moved on out to Houston and Elm and were just speeding up, just a little bit behind schedule for the Trade Mart, when the shots rang out.

F: Do you have any idea what happened?

R: What happened in those--?

F: Yes, did you, back there in the White House bus, have any idea what happened? Or you just knew that something had happened?

R: There was wild confusion on the bus, as there was every place else. I heard two of the shots. I was sitting next to Bob Pierpoint of CBS.

F: It came in clearly over the noise of the crowd?

R: Well, not so clearly. There was not a lot of crowd noise at that point. It had thinned out pretty much. But I guess the two of us

had ridden in maybe hundreds of presidential motorcades all over the world, and you hear backfires all the time. Motorcycles get hot when they travel at slow speed and they backfire, sometimes they even catch fire. But Bob heard something and said, "My God, that sounded like gunfire." He was sitting next to me; we were in the front seat. I perked my head up and heard another crack, and it was almost right overhead because the distance we were behind the presidential car put us almost under the windows of the School Book Depository. As I heard that shot, I saw a cop start to run across Dealey Plaza, pulling out his pistol. Then I heard another crack; I looked up and saw a motorcycle cop ram his bike over the curb and start up what we now know as the grassy knoll. By then I realized that it must be gunfire because the rule is nobody ever bares a pistol in front of the President unless they're either going to kill him or stop somebody from killing him. So I knew that there had been a shooting incident. But we didn't know that the President had been shot.

F: What did they do with your bus then? Did they take you on out to the Trade Mart?

R: They held us up for maybe three, four minutes.

F: Everything just froze up at that point?

R: Well, I say they held us up. I'm not sure that we were being detained. We didn't know where the hell to go. We'd seen the President's car speed up through the underpass, and then we could see it up on--what is it, Stemmons Boulevard?--heading out towards the Trade Mart. For all we knew, sitting there on the

bus, somebody had taken a shot at the President, but we had no reason to believe he had been hit.

F: They had just an evasive action in a sense.

R: For all we knew, they were just following doctrine, which is that when something like that happens--when there's any gunfire. . .

F: Get him out of there.

R: You just get the hell out of there. So nobody on that bus knew that he'd been hit, but we were pretty sure that shots had been fired. We went on to the Trade Mart and burst into this place where there were perhaps a thousand people sitting. Music was playing softly, and the fountains were bubbling with water.

F: Not late enough yet that anyone had any idea [what had happened?]

R: No. Apparently a few people at the speakers table had got word of an incident, but mostly they were just sitting there waiting for the President and it was kind of unreal. About seventy-five of us burst into this hall and asked, "Where's the President, where's the President?" And they said, "Well, we don't know." So nearly everybody jumped on an escalator, went up to the press room that was set up for this luncheon and started calling to find out what had happened. Here we were in Dallas and some reporters called New York, their home offices, to find out what they knew.

I ran out into the parking lot and a cop was sitting there on a three-wheel motorcycle listening to all the traffic on the police radio. Maybe he saw my press badge or whatever, I don't

know, but he looked up at me and said, "They've shot the President. They've taken him to Parkland Hospital." That was the first time I knew he'd been hit. So I ran out into the front of the building--and there I literally ran into Dr. [George] Burkley, who was President Kennedy's private physician, and he was getting into his car. He'd gotten cut off from the President, too. I said, "Will you give me a ride?" I had known him for years, since Eisenhower days; he'd made a couple of trips with Ike as sort of doctor to the press corps. I know he treated me for the trots in New Delhi on an Ike trip. So I knew him a long time and I said, "Give me a ride." And he just slammed the door.

F: And left you?

R: And left me. And a cop, when I told him the situation, walked out into this throughway and just stopped the first car that came along. It was a Mexican-American woman with a teenage daughter in the car, and he said, "Take this man to Parkland Hospital and take him there fast."

F: It was probably her one great moment of involvement in a particular event.

R: So she did. She drove me there in a hell of a hurry and drove me right around to the back. The police lines had not yet formed, and so I got there--

F: At that state at Parkland, I presume it was just wide open for anyone who had enough sense to come? They hadn't thown up any

cordon around it yet?

R: Well, I think I probably could have darted into the hospital. The reporters in the wire service car had gone into the hosital as they took the dying President in and as the Vice President went in. The group that got there in about three cars had about pretty much gone into the hospital, and I suppose I could have gotten in, but standing in the driveway right at the emergency entrance was Senator Yarborough. I knew he had been up riding in one of the lead cards and so I grabbed him. He was my first eyewitness and I, at this time, still didn't have any idea that the President had been gravely wounded. So I started asking him what happened, and this has been quoted many times. He said--it was in an old, flowery, southern fashion--"A perfidious deed has been performed." Or "A terrible thing has happened, the President has been shot." And I said, "Where was he hit?" I remember saying, "Where was he hit?" And he said, "Oh, I can't tell you, I can't tell you," although he'd seen the President's body taken out of the car, so he knew. And he put his hand up to the right rear quarter of his head, which is the part of Kennedy's skull that had been blown out, and said, "I can't tell you," and then unconsciously reached up and indicated where he had been hit. Then the press bus arrived. There was much milling around. Everybody interviewed Yarborough.

F: By now it was ascertained that Johnson had not been hit?

R: It was soon ascertained. Secret Service agents who had gone in and had come back out told us no, there was no heart attack and within

an hour or so we established that if he, in fact, was holding his arm as he went in the hospital, it was probably because Rufus Youngblood jumped on top of him--

F: Kind of wrenched it a little.

R: --and squashed his arm under him probably in the car. No, the rumor that he had been hit was knocked down pretty fast because we were told, "He's in there."

F: Yes.

R: But one thing about this I remember is that, even after we realized that Kennedy was perhaps dying--and we got this in driblets--we weren't thinking about succession. I talked to a nurse who burst into tears, and I realized that she wasn't crying over a superficial flesh wound or something. We saw the priest come, and that indicated last rites. So we were getting the idea gradually that Kennedy was dead or dying. But I still remember no discussion of--I don't remember anybody saying, "My God, Johnson is president or is about to become president." There was almost no focus of attention on him, and this was true as he left the hospital. He left the hospital after Kennedy was dead but before Kennedy's body was removed, and nobody made any attempt to follow him, although he was then president of the United States. He left, actually, just minutes--my recollection is--before the death was announced. And of course that was for security reasons.

F: As far as you know, did he leave in the car he came in?

R: No, he left in--

F: Switched to the bubbletop?

R: He left in Chief [Jesse] Curry's car. At least, it was an unmarked police car.

F: An ordinary [car?]

R: It was driven by Chief Curry. I think it might have been the police chief's own car, but not a White House car at all. Although I didn't see this, of course, it's known that Youngblood and the other agents had him lie down on the back seat of the car as they wheeled out of the hospital grounds, perhaps all the way to Love Field, I don't know.

Then, as Kennedy's body was taken out in this bronze casket, there were probably not more than, oh, six or eight reporters present. Most reporters were then hanging around the press room, inside. I had gone out to the back of the hospital, so I saw the body removed. I know of about three other reporters, but there may have been six or eight there. Wayne Hawks, who was chief of records at the White House, was acting as a deputy press secretary to Mac Kilduff, who was assistant press secretary but was acting press secretary because [Pierre] Salinger wasn't there. Wayne Hawks was organizing a pool of three men, ostensibly to accompany the President's body back to Washington. And he grabbed Merriman Smith of UPI [and] Sid David of Westinghouse Broadcasting. Although it's not one of the major networks, Sid was apparently the

only guy he could find out back there. Then he grabbed Bob Roth of the Philadelphia Record to be the third pool man. I said, "Wait a minute. I was to be the pooler on the next leg of the trip,"--which was to Austin--"I'll take this trip." The thought had crossed my mind that Johnson--by then I had thought of Johnson as the new president--might show up on the plane that was going to fly Kennedy back to Washington, but none of us--

F: But the thought in the planning of the pool was still for President Kennedy? It had nothing to do . . .

R: Exactly. None of us knew we were going out there to see a new President, the new President, sworn in--

F: Or to accompany a new president.

R: --and even less that we were going to fly back on the plane with the dead President, the new President, Jackie, and Lady Bird, and most of their staffs.

F: Let's slow up just a moment on one thing. Veteran newsmen have seen it all and presumably don't stampede easily. Was there a feeling among the White House press corps, widely expressed, that this may be the beginning of some sort of coup d'etat or an attempted nationwide move or a general conspiracy? Or was there a feeling that they had just been through an incident?

R: Well, no. I wouldn't say there was a feeling of a takeover. But there was a fear that--I don't know--perhaps a lot of people thought, as I did, of Lincoln's assassination where not only Lincoln, but four or five

of his Cabinet were marked for assassination, that it might be, just might be, an attempt to literally wipe out the top echelon of government. We certainly had no way of knowing that it was a lone and that day, lucky, gunman. Maybe the best, luckiest shot he ever fired in terms of his past performance as a rifleman. We didn't know and riding out there we rode out in an unmarked police car, no siren. The Secret Service had ordered the sirens off on all cars going to Dallas Love Field, because they didn't want to attract attention to the airport. So we went out there at about seventy miles an hour, with no police escort, in an unmarked car and we actually, when traffic would get too heavy, we crossed the median strip and went down against the traffic. We went through red lights. This, of course--

F: A rather hazardous trip, wasn't it?

R: Oh, it was hair-raising. But this is what we were speculating on in the car. What the hell? Are they going to try for Johnson, and where have they taken him? What's going on in Washington? Or has this even moved . . .are the Russians trying to take over Berlin? You know.

F: Yes.

R: The imagination could run wild. And in that car, we heard a lot of traffic on the radio about this gunman being grabbed in a theater, but we didn't tie it to the assassination.

F: One other thing before we pick up at Love Field. As you said,

you'd been through a hundred or more of these presidential parades in various parts of the world. Do your veteran newspapermen, who are really fairly cynical, do they ever get picked up by a crowd like this and get a bit emotional like the ordinary citizen? Do they feel a surge sometimes? I know that's an individual, subjective thing, but in a case like Dallas, where you're anticipating a great deal of disaffection, do you find an affection pouring out on the streets?

R: Well, it's a little infectious. When you ride in a motorcade where a crowd is warm, and not a controlled warmth--

F: Haven't been told when to clap.

R: --or a turned on warmth like you get, say in Seoul or Taipei. You see hundreds of thousands of people in the street there, but they've all got signs that read the same way and their squad leader or precinct captain is standing at the end of the line telling them to wave the sign and so on. No, when you see a crowd like that crowd in Dallas, which we were looking for as maybe a center of hostility, and they really--it's about seventy degrees and they're in short sleeves and they just swarm out into the street and there's real warmth and spontaneity in it, then you get a little lift out of it. They say it's a tonic to presidents--

F: Yes. I can imagine.

R: --to get that sort of reception, that it recharges their batteries. And a little of that rubs off on us detached observers, even though we're trying to be detached.

F: Okay, let's go back to Love Field. You're in a police car.

R: Yes. We got there of course after both Johnson and the Kennedy casket and had a little trouble getting into the field. They had dropped pretty good security around the plane at that point, around Air Force One. But with a little exchange on the radio, we got up to the apron just a little bit away from the--

F: You personally didn't have to talk your way in?

R: No, no. We had police with us and we had been designated a pool, and the airport had been told, "A press pool will arrive." So we didn't have to get out and brandish our badges or anything, but we tried one entrance and got turned back, and then we tried another gate, got up to about seventy feet from the plane. And I remember there was a phone booth there. Kilduff walked up and told us--it was our first inkling, then, of what we were going to see--that we were going aboard in a few minutes to see the new President sworn in. What we were waiting for, we realized a minute later, was the arrival of Judge [Sarah] Hughes. Smitty--Merriman Smith--ducked into the booth there and got off a quick flash to the UPI and thereby managed to keep the UP ahead of the AP, as it had been all day on that story, because he grabbed the phone in the press car, you know, between Dealey Plaza and the hospital. He was on the phone the whole way. Now, again, they hadn't been able to find Jack Bell of the AP or he probably would have been in this pool, by the way, instead of me. But there was no AP man. Smitty ducked in, got off a call, and

I think he was in the booth as Judge Hughes arrived. She was sort of whisked up the ramp, then Kilduff took us up into the plane right behind her.

It was, as several of us have written, almost suffocating in the plane. I don't think to this day anybody knows that a manifest was ever made of everybody that was on that plane. It was probably grossly overloaded because not only did all of the Kennedy staff people want to ride back with their President, but all of the Johnson staff people, plus people like Jack Valenti who didn't work for either President, had poured aboard. Bill Moyers, who was deputy director of the Peace Corps or something, had been advancing Kennedy's Austin speech. He chartered a plane, flew in from Austin and got aboard.

F: You violated the CAA--

R: Nearly all of the Secret Service agents who were on the trip got aboard that plane, because you had both the Kennedy and Johnson details. Then they took us aboard and Kilduff told us very soon after we got aboard that three of us would witness the swearing-in, but only two would make the trip back. Sid Davis sort of volunteered to get off, because he figured he could broadcast the first eyewitnesser of the swearing-in. He did get off and he performed his duty. He first told the rest of the reporters in Dallas what he had seen, and then he started broadcasting. Smitty and I stayed aboard.

F: In general the reporters did pool with each quite happily and tried to stay close up all the time?

R: Oh, yes. A real crisis or adversity brings out the best in reporters. This was a story that didn't belong to any individual reporter, even any little angle of it. People weren't hoarding. They were pooling everything they could learn back at the hospital and then the same on the swearing-in.

F: Must have had quite a job sifting for what's rumor and what you can depend on.

R: Well, in a case like that you just don't fool with rumor at all. It was too important. But getting back to that plane, I remember as we walked aboard or pushed into this kind of mob, everybody was standing up in the aisles. There was hardly anybody sitting down at that moment. We got all the way to that midships conference room where the swearing-in took place, and Smitty looked down at his right hand and said, "My God, I lost my typewriter." I don't know to this day whether he left it at the hospital or in the car that took us out there; I don't know whether he does. But I remember my reflex. I didn't have any idea whether I was carrying a typewriter or not. I looked down at my right hand, and I still had mine.

Then as we got back into that compartment, we saw--I started to say the Vice President, because we still sort of thought of him as that--Johnson sort of towering over all of these people. There were a bunch of Texas congressmen behind him: Homer Thornberry, Jack Brooks--

F: Jim Wright, maybe?

R: Yes, Jim Wright. I think as he looked and he saw us and he knew that the Judge was aboard, that it was time to begin and he said, "Now we're going to have a swearing-in here, and I would like anybody who wants to see it to come on in to this compartment." I believe he said, "We've got the press here, so we can go ahead." He had been advised that there ought to be witnesses to it, I guess. Then we had a fairly short wait, waiting for Jackie to come out. She was back in the bedroom compartment. And during that time, I realized later, Larry O'Brien was looking for a Bible. As you know--I think I broke this story--it wasn't a Bible; it was a Catholic missal, a sort of prayer book in Latin and English that they found back in Kennedy's quarters and--

F: A Bible wasn't standard equipment aboard Air Force One?

R: Well, Bill Manchester wrote in his book--he got carried away and wrote that it was a Bible that Kennedy often read at night while he was making trips. He would read this Bible at night before he would turn out his lights, Manchester said. I later tracked down Larry O'Brien, months later, and found out it was a Catholic missal that somebody had thrust at Kennedy, probably on that trip. It was like a souvenir, a gift that somebody had pressed on him, and the cellophane hadn't even been removed from the book. It was in its box, and it was in a cellophane wrapper.

F: Gratuitous, anyhow.

R: But that's what served as a Bible. Anyway, it took a little time for Larry O'Brien to find that, a little time to get Mrs. Kennedy. She was really in a state of what I would call medical shock, not just shock, but an almost glazed look on her face. She seemed almost unaware of what was happening and, curiously, had a kind of a little frozen smile on her face. We lined up in sort of semicircles around the aft door to that midships compartment, and then Mrs. Kennedy came through that door. We were pretty well deployed in semicircles around that door when she came out. Mac Kilduff had gotten the idea that there ought to be a voice transcription of the oath, and he had grabbed, not a tape recorder, but a Dictaphone, and the pictures show him holding the microphone up near the President's mouth.

Cecil Stoughton, the Army photographer, had gotten up on a transom, a sofa, flattened himself against the bulkhead, so that he could make a picture of it. And I remember him asking us to move back a little. He had a wide-angle, kind of a fish-eye, lens on his camera. But even so, he had to ask us to move back a little.

But there was no--again, I must take fault with Manchester. He suggests in his book that there was an unconscionable delay, that the distraught widow was kept there at the airport--it sounds like hours, almost--while the President waited for a judge to come and swear him in. The fact is, if you reconstruct the timetable, Mrs. Kennedy wasn't aboard that plane much more than--well, I would have to look at

the timetable again--it seems to me something like twenty-five minutes, twenty to twenty-five minutes, from the time the casket was put aboard and she boarded--Johnson of course, was already on the plane--until the time Judge Hughes arrived and the oath was administered. I know we boarded at about two-thirty.

When Jackie was brought out, my recollection is that she came out on the arm of Kenny O'Donnell, although it might have been Larry O'Brien. Again, I'll take issue with Manchester. He wrote in the first version of his book, the part that appeared in Look--he later modified it in the hardback edition of the book--but he wrote that not a single male member of the Kennedy staff watched the swearing-in. As you know, as Cecil Stoughton's unpublished pictures have shown, there were about a half a dozen of them there, just about all that were in Texas: Kenny O'Donnell, Larry O'Brien, Ted Clifton, and others.

F: Not to mention Kilduff, who in a sense--

R: Kilduff, of course, holding the microphone.

F: Was there any crowd reaction when she came in, in the sense of either--

R: A hush, a hush. Everybody . . .

F: Everybody was pretty still anyhow, weren't they?

R: Pretty still, but trying to maintain a sort of subdued amiability. You know, everybody being very courteous to everybody else.

F: Kind of a contrived naturalness?

R: Exactly. Trying not to be stricken, but talking banalities to try

to keep from collapsing, maybe. But that stopped as she came in, and this was the first time I realized how blood spattered she was. This strawberry pink wool suit had some blood on it, but one of her stockings was just completely saturated with blood. And, as I say, she absolutely looked glazed.

In that first semicircle facing Judge Hughes, you had Lady Bird on the President's right, and then Jackie on the President's left. Evelyn Lincoln was standing right behind the President. I was standing right behind her. I remember Johnson turning around, seeing Evelyn Lincoln there, Kennedy's secretary, and kissing her.

There was one kind of eerie sound effect I remember. I'm not sure if they had warmed up that plane or not but they had started up one engine and then cut it back to an idle, and so there was kind of a whine of a jet engine, not the roar, but as we stood in that compartment, a sort of a whine in the background.

Judge Hughes spoke very softly as she read the oath, which I think Marie Fehmer had had dictated to her from the Justice Department. Of course it's in the Constitution, probably in an almanac aboard the plane for all we know. But she had it typed out on a little piece of an Air Force One memo pad. The President later, himself, brought that up to us in case we wanted the exact wording of the oath. Judge Hughes read the oath. He repeated it.

F: Did she have reasonable composure?

R: Yes, she did. He repeated it very softly and added the words,

"So help me God," which are not a part of that oath, and then turned to his right and kissed Lady Bird, turned to his left and, in my notebook, just took Mrs. Kennedy by the arms, kind of embraced her, holding her arms. Smitty wrote that he turned and kissed her, too, but that's a detail. It was, again, a situation where hobody knew what to do. You don't have a big congratulations in that situation--

F: No outbreak of applause.

R: --with the widow standing there. I remember what most people did was just sort of shake his hand and say, "Good luck to you" or--

F: "God bless you."

R: --"God bless you," "God be with you," or something. I'm not a deeply religious person, but what I said to him when I shook his hand and I clasped his elbow--he was famous for massaging elbows--I think I clasped his elbow as I shook his hand and said, "God be with you, Mr. President." Then my recollection is that there was a little delay because Mrs. Kennedy was standing there and nobody knew what to say to her. Of course, Lady Bird talked to her. Lady Bird said something like, I caught the words, "All the nation mourns your husband." And I remember Chief Curry saying to her, "You've had a hard day, little lady. You'd better go lie down and get some rest," or words to that effect. I quoted him accurately in the book I did on the assassination. But she didn't move off right away and there

was a sort of milling around with nobody knowing what to say, what to do, after shaking Johnson's hand. Then she retired to the rear, and that's when Johnson gave what I'm sure was his first order as president. He said, "Now let's get airborne."

F: Was there any confusion as to who stayed and who got to go? Had this been pretty well worked out.

R: Well, I don't know. The only person that I know that got put off, because there knew there was an overload problem, was Sid Davis.

F: They didn't have any official list such as they usually have?

R: It wasn't an easy plane to get on, but you had so many people who had come with Kennedy, so many with Johnson. And the new President of course wanted all of his people on--Liz Carpenter, everybody who was traveling with him. Then he authorized people like Jack Valenti who had simply been riding in the motorcade, didn't even have a toothbrush with him. I don't think Jack got any luggage up from Houston to Washington for something like a week. He was going out and buying toothbrushes and shirts and stuff, living at the White House. No, I don't know of anybody else who got put off. We do know that as Judge Hughes left, she handed that missal book to somebody, or somebody asked her for it, and somebody's got it now and--

F: Has never surfaced with it.

R: Whoever has it has a historic document, but it's one of those things like a stolen painting by an old master. How are you going to

boast about it or show it to anybody, because it was, in effect, swiped, taken by subterfuge from Judge Hughes as she got off the plane. There's one thing you haven't asked me. I just touched on it, but I would like to underline it. There was not the tension, the crackling, white hot tension aboard this plan between a Kennedy faction and a Johnson faction. . .

F: I was going to ask you. Had you chosen sides?

R: That appears in Bill Manchester's version of the thing. Bill talked to a lot of people much later who must have misled him with statements like, "Not a member of Kennedy's staff would even watch the swearing-in." They were either blinded by grief or sorrow or their prejudice against Johnson into saying: A--that Johnson's takeover was rough and crude and that he appropriated the plane and B--that there was a great tension aboard the plane. It simply didn't exist. Larry O'Brien is perhaps the best example of a Kennedy man who immediately went to work for LBJ.

Kenny O'Donnell and Godfrey McHugh were obsessed with the idea of getting the plane off the ground, because the county medical examiner had told them that the body couldn't be flown out without an autopsy, and they were determined to get that plane off the ground. There's no question about that. McHugh, who was a brigadier general in the air force and was Kennedy's air force aide, went flitting up and down the aisle trying to get the pilot to get the plane off the ground, because his President was aboard and he didn't care whether the new President got sworn in or not.

But it was not like two armed camps aboard, waging a feud over who was going to be aboard the plane and when it was going to take off. That just didn't happen.

F: I suspect some of the Johnson people, like Valenti, didn't even know who the personnel were, wouldn't have known which side to choose, to some extent.

R: Well, that's true. Valenti certainly didn't know Kennedy's White House staff. There was a disagreement over whether the plane should have taken off the minute the casket got put aboard. But Kenny O'Donnell told the Warren Commission under oath that all he did was tell the President, "We want to get this body out of here because they, the Dallas authorities, claim we can't take off without an autopsy, and Mrs. Kennedy wants to go back, wants to stay with it, so we want to get out of here." And he said under oath that when Johnson told him, "Well, I've talked to the Attorney General, and he thinks I should be sworn in here before we fly back," Kenny then said, "When I realized what the reason for the delay was, that was it." Those are the approximate quotes. And it wasn't all that much of a delay, and there wasn't all that much tension, because Smitty and I would have been it if there had been.

F: And nobody from the Dallas County Medical Authority banged on your door saying, "You can't go."?

R: No, no, no. Once they got to the field, got the casket aboard the plane, there was no problem. Now it is true that there was very little mingling of the Kennedy's inner circle and the Johnson people

on the flight back. That is simply for the reason that they held sort of a wake in that rear compartment where the casket was. Kenny O'Donnell, McHugh, Dave Powers, and for part of the time at least, Larry O'Brien, just simply stayed back there with Mrs. Kennedy, whereas, the President and his staff were beginning to do the things that they had to do on assumption of office.

He was in touch with Washington by phone. He even had a conference with Larry O'Brien on what their problems were going to be with Congress as soon as he got back to Washington. I'm sure he talked to Mac Bundy, who was Kennedy's national security advisor and who became his national security advisor. There was a matter of preparing a statement to be made on his arrival back in Washington, that was prepared. And, again, he brought it forward and handed it, two onionskin copies of it, one to Smitty and one to me. He said something like, "Here's my first statement." I didn't realize at that moment that what he meant was, "This is the statement I am going to read when I get off the plane at Andrews Air Force Base."

He talked to us two or three times on the way back and was extremely cooperative, told us anything we wanted to know. Any information that we needed he would give us or see that we got it. I remember I was trying to write a pool report at one point when he came up and talked to us, and this seems almost incredible now, but

I felt almost like saying, "Mr. President, I know you want to talk, but I've got a lot of work to do."

F: Yes. "Not now, Mr. President."

R: I didn't say it, but it was the feeling I had. I had so much to write.

F: Is that what you and Smitty were mainly doing, preparing copy?

R: Yes. They got out a--

F: Were you sending it ahead, or were you holding it to hand when you got in?

R: To hand off the minute we landed. Smitty had lost his typewriter so they had to take one of the White House electric typewriters, and I don't think he had much experience with an electric typewriter, so he was having a hell of a time writing. I was writing on my portable. We had one of these seats that has a table in front of it and we were surrounded by people who were just . . .

F: Is that what you and Smitty were mainly doing, or did you have time to talk with people and try to reconstruct?

R: No. We didn't do a lot of interviewing of people. I was sitting opposite Roy Kellerman, I remember, who was in charge of the presidential security detail on that trip. I threw a couple of questions over to him. He was not crying, but his eyes were brimming. You've heard of strong men crying; well, we had it there. And you had people like Evelyn Lincoln and Pam Turnure. I remember Pam, especially; she was Jackie's press secretary. She'd cried and her mascara had smeared, and so her face was just streaked,

streaked with black mascara.

F: It must have been an unreal trip in a way.

R: Well, it was. All of the shades were drawn when we got aboard, I suppose for security reasons. Somebody must have gotten aboard and figured, "Well, if there's a gunman up in the terminal, he's not going to be able to see through these windows and pick out another target." So all the shades were drawn. Well, for some reason all those curtains stayed down all the way back. Somebody may have raised one an inch or two, but basically we were flying six hundred and fifty miles an hour in a plane that we couldn't see out of the windows of.

F: It was really in a tunnel.

R: Yes, like going back in a tunnel. And much, much crying.

F: Were there audible sobs and so on? Did they kind of come in waves? Were they consistent?

R: Oh, no. It was not like a chorus of sobs. But the women, the secretaries, people like Pam, Evelyn Lincoln, could be heard sobbing every now and then. And those that weren't talking or doing anything generally just rode with their foreheads cupped in their hands, probably concealing the fact that they were crying.

F: Probably each person had his own kind of timetable of realization, too.

R: Yes, it was a sinking-in. We were all doing second, third, fourth takes, realizing all of the implications of the thing as we rode back.

F: Were you fed any information from the ground as to what was going on?

For instance, in the air, did you learn the identity of Oswald or anything like that?

R: No, no. We didn't.

F: So you arrived, in a sense, in Washington as ignorant as when you left Dallas.

R: Still not knowing whether there was a worldwide conspiracy, whether the shots were fired by three or four people or just one.

F: Basically, you knew a president had been killed, a governor shot, and that was it.

R: That's about it. To me, Johnson's conduct in that period--I think we took two hours and twelve minutes--was, to coin a phrase, his "finest hour." He couldn't have been more considerate, not only of Jackie, but of all the Kennedy people. He was thoughtful. He was thinking ahead. There was nothing unseemly at all about his takeover. It was not a grasping for power. It would have been of course utterly absurd for him to fly all the way back to Washington without taking the oath, for the country for two hours and twelve minutes not to have a Constitutionally sworn president. It would have been absurd for him not to take Air Force One, or the plane Air Force 26000, which was the plane Kennedy had gone down there on because it had better communications equipment, decoding, coding, and so forth. He was the President. He should have flown on the plane with the best equipment. Furthermore, if he had left Jackie behind to fly back on either plane with just a corporal's guard of mourners and get off the plane alone with the casket--if he hadn't stayed by the

widow and paid Kennedy the honor of accompanying the body back--he would have been criticized forever after. So all of those things that he did were right, and yet the people who never did like the man and never will found some way to criticize him for all of the right things that he did, all of the right, compassionate things he did.

F: I was going to ask that. Didn't you get the feeling that maybe the Kennedys understood, accepted and so forth, this transfer, but the trouble comes with the lieutenants? There's something dramatic about going out of power, anyhow. I'm sure the Johnson people feel a certain antipathy toward the Nixon people as usurpers, even though they knew for months it was going to happen.

R: Yes. Well, when it comes that suddenly--

F: It's just a surrender. But I mean, like this--

R: You are in physical shock, and you realize that your world has ended professionally, too, you might say.

F: It's a good life and suddenly it's snatched from you.

R: So if you're asking who blew their cool that day--was it the Johnson people or the Kennedy people?--the answer has got to be that it was the Kennedy people who blew their cool and, God knows, I forgive them for it.

F: Yes.

R: It's understandable. But for the story to be told the other way, a suggestion that Johnson was overeager, that he was not compassionate

and considerate, is just absurd because he was cool, correct, compassionate, deferential to the Kennedy people. Even with hindsight, I don't know how he could improve on it. It was a masterful takeover, considering the circumstances. I mean, after all, he was the first President ever to witness the murder of his predecessor, so he could have been forgiven if he hadn't been too cool. But the fact is he was cool.

F: None of this, "My God, they're probably after me, too" sort of reaction from him, at least not for public consumption?

R: He was not cringing or cowering, certainly. Outwardly, visibly, he certainly didn't show any signs of fear. He did what the Secret Service asked him to do, which was to leave the hospital quietly in an unmarked car, get aboard that plane. And then, of course, they had pretty good security at Andrews when we landed there.

F: Okay, it's a winter now, or on the threshold, so it gets dark early.

R: Yes, it was dark. We got out in a blaze of lights, and the story of how he was prevented from getting off of the plane with the Kennedy casket is known. I was not witness to it because I was in the forward part of the plane at the time, but I do know the aisle was blocked. And, again, this was the Kennedy people, I think, not showing an appreciation of how important continuity was. It was almost as if they were angry at Johnson, certainly in that gesture.

F: Almost as if you had shot the last President. There was no succession.

R: It was their President and they were angry at the world, perhaps.

But I didn't see that. I only know that he got off the front ramp and he'd been excluded from the removal of the casket. He let the unloading of the casket and the placing of it in a hearse--actually it was an ambulance, a Navy ambulance--go on without participating in any way because he had been excluded from it. Then he walked over. A few people came up. He conferred with them briefly before he walked over and made that statement. I remember Mac Bundy was one, and Bundy later told me that he was able to tell him by the time he arrived in Washington that there was no movement anywhere else in the world, that there was no indication of a worldwide plot. He was probably also able to tell him by then that they had a likely suspect in Dallas and give him a little clearer picture of what was happening. Then in the glare of the TV lights he read this very simple, and I think, graceful statement that he had handed to us on the plane. I think Liz Carpenter was the sort of co-author of that thing, and I think it was very well done.

Then we flew by helicopter from Andrews--

F: You, too?

R: Yes--to the White House. The thing that sticks in my mind about that trip, we landed after the President. I think they sent in one security helicopter with just agents aboard it, then they landed the president's chopper. Then I was on a chopper with Smitty and with people from both staffs. The guy sitting across from me on that chopper was Ted Sorensen, who hadn't made the trip, but had gone

out to Andrews. But instead of going up to Bethesda [Naval Hospital] with Kennedy's body, he got on the chopper and flew back to the White House. Of course, he was the principal writer on the speech Johnson made to Congress, his first speech to Congress. Ted was in the same sort of state of absolute, numb shock that Jackie was in. He was crying, literally crying, a grown man with tears rolling from his eyes. You would speak to him, and it was as though he didn't hear you. He was absolutely numb and moving almost mechanically.

F: You just couldn't penetrate him? I can imagine what it must have been like to go back to your office in the White House and realize there was a certain futility in what you were doing, what you had to do, what had been done.

R: Yes. Well, some people realized that they were serving the presidency; not just a president from Massachusetts, but the presidency. The best examples that come to mind are Larry O'Brien and Mac Bundy. Larry immediately went to work for Johnson on what needed to be done legislatively, how the situation had changed and what could be done, and of course was a great help to him in getting through almost the entire Kennedy program that had been stymied in Congress. Much of it would not have been passed, I'm afraid, under Kennedy. Given the impetus of Dallas and everything, much of it was passed, perhaps as a sort of memorial to

Kennedy. But Larry O'Brien is example one. He went to work immediately. As he said to me later, "You do what you've got to do." Mac Bundy was another, McGeorge Bundy. He was serving his country, not an individual. He was serving the presidency, and he was up all night long and went into an overtime kind of schedule, instead of withdrawing.

Now, there are others who stayed on the payroll because, again, with his compassion and his desire for continuity, Johnson wouldn't fire a Kennedy staff person. And there were some who took advantage of this, stayed on the payroll and hardly did a day's work after Dallas. Some of them stayed on nine, ten months.

F: Did he ever confide to you that he wished some of them would quit?

R: Well, he once said that he thought he had made a mistake in keeping some of them in key jobs. And I think it's a matter of record now that he told this to Nixon on Inauguration Day: "Don't make the mistake of trying to work with people who are not loyal to you." We're talking about key jobs now. He wasn't urging him to turn out every Democrat in town, but he did say that to Nixon on Inaugural Day. And he did say to me once, over in the Mansion on an off the record basis, that he wished he had had people of total and undivided loyalty from the minute he took the oath.

F: You don't think he ever really felt sabotaged though?

R: Oh, no.

F: He didn't get a hundred per cent or a hundred and fifty per cent

out of some people?

R: Well, he might have felt . . . I'm not sure. God knows, in his last few days in office he felt sabotaged when Stu Udall--

F: Got at cross purposes?

R: --out of the blue, started signing orders that did not have White House clearance, one of which was the renaming of the D.C. Stadium to Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Staddium.

F: What did you do the next few days, in that period between the arrival and the burial of Kennedy?

R: I was up all of that first night writing. I went over to the White House early in the morning. They brought Kennedy's body back to the White House, put it in the East Room sometime in the early morning. I did not get over there for that. I went over at about mid-morning, around ten o'clock or so, and some of us were taken up to the East Room to see the casket, the catafalque, that had been set up there. Then I think about mid-afternoon I went home, after filing everything I could possibly think of to Newsweek. I never did do a first person story that day. I wish I had, but I just didn't.

F: What happens, speaking strictly professionally, you've got maybe the biggest story of the century, or one of the largest, anyhow, with a whale of a lot going on. Do you rigidly maintain the production schedules on something like that, and you just go as far as you can within your time limit, or do you--?

R: Oh, no. This was a Friday, happened on a Friday afternoon, and we didn't lock up that week's magazine until sometime Monday.

F: When would you ordinarily have locked it up?

R: Saturday night. No, we held, and wrote and wrote and wrote, and of course the story kept running down in Dallas.

F: It got worse instead of better.

R: Yes, it got bigger and more complicated. But I wrote until late Saturday afternoon, went home and got some sleep, then came back and went to work again. And if you remember--again, this is kind of strange in retrospect--the focus, the first five days of the Johnson Administration, was still on President Kennedy. What I was working on, after I got some sleep and came back to work, was the Kennedy funeral and the Kennedy story for almost another week.

F: I think from a public acceptance standpoint Johnson didn't become president until after the--well, maybe at the time of the reception of the foreign dignitaries was the first time. You'd buried Kennedy by then.

R: No, I think even then . . .

F: You think he was just standing in at the public line?

R: He was more or less upstaged by Jackie. That was not her design, I'm sure.

F: No.

R: But deGaulle's call on her turned out to be the biggest event that

came out of all of the foreign dignitaries who came over.

F: During that weekend was White House security tighter than usual, or were you pretty free to come and go in accustomed fashion?

R: It was tighter than usual.

F: No problems from a correspondent's standpoint?

R: Well, not if they knew you. I'd been covering the White House by then for, I don't know, ten years or something like that, and I was simply known to the guards and the Secret Service. But they did, indeed, tighten White House security. For a while early in the Johnson Administration they wanted us all to wear what we inevitably called dog-tags, to take our White House press passes--

F: Put them around your neck.

R: --which have a little hole in them, put a chain through that, and wear them around our necks so they were visible at all times. There was much complaining over that, and the rule was relaxed. But there was a tightening of security.

F: Was the fact that you were highly visible for two hours and twelve minutes, and a little before and aft, ever give you any special intimacy with the President in the days ahead? Was that an advantage?

R: I remember he remembered it, and would mention it occasionally.

F: He would just sort of use you as a resource person?

R: The last time we went in to see him, just a few days before he left--this was not an individual call, but he got some of us

who had covered his whole administration in the Fish Room and gave us a gift, which was a leather-covered album of color pictures. I think they were all of his round-the-world trip. And he gave me mine, as he handed it to me, he said, "Chuck, you were with me at the beginning and I'm glad you're here at the end." So there was an awareness, but he certainly never did feel that I was one of the friendliest, that I was a cheering section or anything. Because some of the things that I wrote in Newsweek over the years made him sore as hell.

F: Did he set out from the outset to change the format of press relations, or did he just let the thing just sort of develop by whim and mood?

R" Well, he definitely tried to change things. His press relations were totally different from Kennedy's, just as Kennedy's were totally different from Ike's. Ike kept the press at arm's length, never saw individual reporters, and only a couple or three times at the very end of his eight years, did he see reporters on an off-the-record, background basis, a small group of reporters, the so-called White House regulars. So Ike kept them at arm's length. Kennedy was, in contrast, very friendly with reporters, called us by our first names and did have individual reporters in, tried the technique of having backgrounders where the regulars could talk to him, but what he said would not be attributed directly to him. He would use euphemisms as. . .

F: Highly informed sources?

R: --circumlocutions such as people who have seen, friends who have seen the President recently report, and so on.

Johnson apparently felt, and maybe with good reason, that he had to really, really win over the friendship of the press, because he had kind of a nothing role as vice president, after being a very powerful man on the Hill. He had been in obscurity for two years. This was a new bunch of reporters. It wasn't the crowd that he knew from Capitol Hill. He knew that many of them were Kennedy worshipers, idolators and that they admired the Kennedy style, most of all, and that he didn't fit that mold. So he worked overtime, went out of his way to talk to the press in groups and individually. He spent many hours--early on, anyway, before he got disillusioned with trying to cultivate the press--talking to us in small groups and individually and trying in a very, almost a too open way, to court us, to win our friendship and enlist us as advocates.

F: Yes.

R: One of the things, I think, that hurt him a lot was on an early trip he had a small pool. When the President makes a trip you have a press plane that may have anywhere from twenty-five to a hundred reporters on it, depending on the trip. Out of that group, you'll take three or four and put them aboard the President's plane, so that if it makes a forced landing or is diverted or anything else,

the President is covered at all times. That always includes two wire services and one or more of the networks, and then some specials. Well, he told a pool early on that--the gist of it was--"If you guys stick with me, if you cooperate with me, I'll see that you all get stories." And, in effect, "You'll all be famous." There was even a crack about Smitty--and Smitty must not have been on that pool--because he said, "Merriman Smith doesn't have to be the only guy who writes books about the President." The implication was, "Play ball with me, and I'm going to feed you all stories and keep you happy."

F: Do you think he was innocent enough to think he could, or do you think this was just a real lack of understanding of the function of the press? You would agree that if I, as President, give you special consideration, then for whatever gratitude I get out of you, one, I'm going to make ten other people unhappy, and, two, you almost have to bend over backwards, from a professional standpoint, to show your objectivity.

R: Reporters recoil from that kind of wooing because they know that there's got to be a quid pro quo, that if they're going to be intimate with the President, a part of the bargain is that they sacrifice their objectivity or their independence or their integrity, however you want to put it. They like to be close to the President and be able to see him up close, but they want to observe him with detachment. At least the people who have been around for a long

time realize the pitfalls of getting too buddy-buddy with the President and becoming a part of the New Frontier or the Fair Deal or the Crusade or whatever. They're supposed to be observers of it and not cheerleaders.

There was hardly anything, outside of maybe Vietnam, that he worked harder at. It was really kind of an obsession with him to get a good press, to overcome what he saw as prejudice of the press, particularly the people who had so admired Kennedy.

F: Do you think the prejudice was there?

R: Well, with many it was. There's no doubt about it. A lot of them, in my book, confused style with substance, and Kennedy had a style. Every president has a different style. Johnson had a totally different style. It just happened that with his style, crude as it was, he got more legislation on the books in a few months than Kennedy had been able to get through Congress in a couple of years, and then he went on from there and got more social legislation on the books in his five years than any president in history, of course. So, stylish or not, he was an effective president, but I think I once said that he was attracted to the press like a moth to the flame. And this is true in the sense that he couldn't resist courting the press, wooing the press, but the closer he got to them, the more a lot of reporters recoiled.

F: You got the feeling, in a sense, he would like to have edited your copy for you.

R: Oh, no question about it. The President hasn't lived who wouldn't like to have the final edit.

F: Don't you have a natural in-built conflict over a period of time between any president and the press? There gets to be a certain disenchantment to exist.

R: I think the disenchantment sets in if they see too much of him. It sort of destroys the mystique of the presidency if he takes you up into his living quarters, where he may go to the bathroom or walk around in his shorts.

F: You need to see him as the president and not as a man.

R: Well, distance lends enchantment if the president is a rather remote figure and the mystique and the majesty of the office are preserved by the fact that you see him only rarely. He should certainly keep you informed one way or another of what his aims are, what he's doing, and so on. I'm not saying there should be an iron curtain. But when the curtain is just raised completely, and you're summoned for lunches or exclusive interviews, but always on a background, "Don't quote me" basis . . . If you see too much of the man, you begin to see more of the warts when you're up that close. I think, just to recap it, that the Ike idea--which may have been invented by Jim Hagerty--of the President keeping the press at arm's length, staying a little aloof, is probably the best format for presidential press relations.

(Interruption)

The thing that Kennedy invented, that was most helpful, was making staff people available. . .

Tape 2 of 3

R: [Tape starts abruptly] . . . but that's kind of the ultimate in brush-offs.

F: Yes.

R: I wrote just a two paragraph letter to the President after his retirement saying that I appreciated that because of his arrangement with CBS he might not or probably wouldn't want to talk on the record, but at least I'd like to stop in as a friend and tell him that he's sorely missed in Washington, that "you are sorely missed in Washington," or something like that.

F: Yes.

R: I didn't even get a reply from him. The story I did on the credibility gap. . . my relations with him were never the same after that. I don't know if you ever saw that piece, but I guess it was the first piece in a national publication that used the term "credibility gap" and gave it national circulation. It was kind of a roundup of many things he had said or done that were less than truthful.

F: Did you get the feeling that he really could not take criticism? You know, a politician is in the middle of it from the time he first offers himself.

R: Well, sure, but that doesn't mean he can't be thin-skinned. And he

had the thinnest skin of any politician I've ever seen. For a guy that had been around for thirty years, it was just amazing.

F: The scar tissue never had built up.

R: No.

F: --and haired over, as they say in cattle terms.

R: Yes. He was still super-sensitive.

F: Were you witness to some of these famous moods? Either high exhilaration or low?

R: Yes. I saw him more in the manic cycle, I think, than in his lows. I've seen him when he was very fed up with criticism, and where he would take a paper and say, "Look at this story. Look at this story. Look at this story. They're all ganging up on me. Why? I'm the only president they've got." I've seen him in that kind of a low.

F: Did he ever turn loose on you?

R: Oh, yes.

F: Or did he just give you the silent treatment?

R: Well, both. He's turned loose on me for things that appeared in Newsweek.

F: Whether you had written them or not?

R: Yes. Sometimes.

F: In other words, he sort of personalized the magazine through you.

R: Yes. Well, I'll tell you, he would say--It's hard to answer these, because you get so many different responses. I remember once I

had what we call a private session with him. I was in alone, and it may have been the day that picture over there was taken. We walked over to the teletype machines. He wanted to see the closing Dow Jones average that day, I think. He always watched that stock market ticker, among other things, on the wire. But I know that it was while we were standing there, and he put his arm on my shoulder and said, "You know, Chuck, I feel a lot better toward you than I do towards Kay Graham, or Newsweek, or the Washington Post." And I think this was probably a true statement, that he felt maybe that I was a better personal friend than any of those, than Kay or either of those institutions, but it was another example of that trying to court and woo. He was trying to separate me from my publication and--it seems to me--make me a personal ally of his, even if Newsweek wasn't.

F: To a certain extent, to a great extent I gather, Newsweek is independent of the Post, in spite of the common ownership. Did he nonetheless tend to associate Newsweek personnel with the Post because of the ownership, and if the Post in his opinion sinned then Newsweek did too, by association?

R: No, I think he separated them. For one thing, there was no identity of policy between Newsweek and the Post. On Vietnam, for instance, they were apart for a while. Basically, Newsweek doesn't have an editorial page and doesn't take a line. On the other hand, it reports interpretively and analytically. Newsweek, when it did take an editorial stand, came out for getting

out of Vietnam, turned anti-Vietnam, long before the Washington Post did. That's just an example. So, he knew they were both owned by Kay Graham, and he knew that Phil Graham had been a good friend of his, and of course Kay was. Sometimes I think he couldn't understand why people who were friends of his and who liked him, how they could possibly write anything the least bit critical of him. Whether it was naive or what, I don't know, but he just felt that you were either for him or against him, and if you were a friend of his, by God, you ought to be for him.

F: A hundred per cent.

R: A hundred per cent.

F: Did you know Phil Graham fairly well?

R: Fairly well, yes.

F: He and the President sort of got at cross purposes before Phil died, and I wondered if you were in on that?

R: No, I'm not privy to that at all. I've never even straightened out, to my own satisfaction, what happened. . .

F: I have Kay's version of it, so that's--

R: No, I was going to say what happened at Los Angeles; what Phil's role was in getting Johnson on the ticket at Los Angeles in 1960. He played a role in that. There have been about three or four versions of it, but I don't know how influential he was in either getting Johnson onto the ticket or getting Johnson to go onto the

ticket or in getting Kennedy to put him on the ticket.

F: Right.

R: But he played some sort of a broker's role there, apparently. I certainly am not privy to any falling out that they may have had before Phil died.

F: Okay, you've got him as president and this is the end of November, 1963. You've got the fact that he became president just before an election year. Was there any difference in Johnson as a potential candidate and Johnson as kind of a secure president in his own right, you might say, after November of 1964?

R: Oh, yes. Matter of fact, that gets back to the question that you asked me a minute ago that I really never did answer, or didn't finish the answer to, as to what I saw of him during highs and lows in mood. From 1963, from the time he became president until that election of 1964, he was running, and he knew he was running. He was confident he was going to win and that was a kind of a manic year. He was really on a cloud for that whole period. He laid a great foundation for it. During the month of mourning for Kennedy, I think one of the cleverest or one of the wisest things he did during his early presidency was--without violating good taste or anything else--he used that period of mourning to call in people--businessmen, especially, to build bridges to the business community that Kennedy had destroyed--

F: Particularly with the steel crisis.

R: --by calling them sons of bitches. Johnson called in businessmen; he called in labor people, although he didn't have to build any bridges to them. Well, he did, too. His relations with labor had not been too good. He called in church people, and he called in ethnic groups. He had literally hundreds of leaders of organizations representing millions of people in that White House during that month and told them, "I need you. I need your help more than Jack Kennedy did, and I'm the only president that you've got." He enlisted their sympathy, understanding, made them feel that they had a friend at the White House, and he built a fantastic base that way.

F: You could see this building, from your vantage point, from just--

R: Well, yes, I could see this steady stream of people coming in.

F: Were most of these off the record?

R: Oh, yes. I think they were all off the record. But in retrospect, I know that it made him a lot of friends. It made a lot of organizations and whole communities friendly to him, people that hadn't much understood him. I don't think he had a great rapport with the Negro community, although he had virtually passed, made possible the passage of the civil rights act back in 1957. They were suspicious of him as a southerner, let's say. Business was suspicious of him because he was a Democrat. Liberals were suspicious of him because he was a Texan.

F: He had voted for Taft-Hartley.

R: And labor was suspicious of him. And he, I think, allayed a lot of those fears and really convinced them, "I need your help." And it wasn't just a show. Of course, this guy was on the phone more than any president in history. He made the phone an instrument of national policy, and he did talk to these people. He maintained these communications over most of the five years. Anyway, he started out doing that. He started out traveling around the country a lot. He was campaigning as early as the spring of 1964. We were up in New England, one trip I remember, and I've never seen a president so charged up as he got on that trip up into New England.

F: The crowds were a real intoxication.

R: It was a tonic to him, and he couldn't stop. He'd be in a motorcade, and if he was on his way back to the airport and three hours behind schedule, and if there would be fifty people standing on a street corner, he'd stop the motorcade and give them a little speech. In Hartford, I think--let's see, yes, we were in Connecticut-- he motioned to the crowd to come in, and they swarmed all over the presidential car. It was scratched up unmercifully. Then he got down and stood up in the big security car, the Queen Mary, using a bull horn to talk to the crowd. Well, this is what I would call Johnson in the manic phase. By this time, programs were going through Congress; he was way up in the polls; it looked like Goldwater was going to win the Republican nomination. He was confident he was going to win.

F: Did he ever give any evidence to you that he wanted Goldwater as an opponent? Did you get that feeling?

R: Well, he never said that to me. There's certainly no doubt that he knew he'd be the weakest opponent he could get. But he did say once that the guy he would like to beat was Nixon. And I think the reasons for that are. . . There's no doubt in my mind that he would have liked to beat Nixon. He rolled up the biggest plurality in history, but he did it against a pushover.

But anyway, all during that year, from November 1963 to November of 1964, things were going his way in the polls and he was getting big crowd responses wherever he went. He established communications with all of these groups, and he was getting ready to move from the last of the New Frontier legislation into the Great Society program. He came up with that in May of 1964 at Ann Arbor.

Now that was the day I rode back from Ann Arbor to Washington on his plane. This, again, is what I would call the President in a manic phase. And I don't use that term critically. I'm not using it as a psychiatrist would. I just mean he was absolutely. . .

F: Kind of euphoric.

R: Euphoric. It was a commencement at the University of Michigan. There were about 80,000 people in that big stadium. Well, he was popular then. No security problems then. Dick Goodwin had written him a hell of a speech. He delivered it well, despite a

high wind that blew over the microphones once. The crowd listened to it. They seemed to get the idea that here he was laying out a new program, that this was the new Johnson program now coming on.

So when he got back on the plane, he was sweating and exuberant. It was a hot day and despite that wind he was just absolutely soaked, his shirt was soaked. He got aboard the plane, and he violated his old rule and had himself a drink, a Scotch highball, and came back to our press pool. I think Merriman Smith of UPI and maybe Frank Cormier of the AP were the other poolers. Johnson asked, "Well, what did you think of it?" And I said, "Well, you got a hell of a reception." I said, "There were twenty-seven interruptions for applause." He said, "No, no, there were twenty-nine." (Laughter) And I said, "Well, I counted twenty-seven, Mr. President, but they sure received it well." He said, "Now wait a minute, there were twenty-nine. Jack--" And he called Valenti, and Valenti came up and he had a marked text. He'd had a script of the speech, and he'd followed it and he'd marked the applause just as reporters do on a speech like that. It turned out that Jack had marked the applause when he was introduced and the applause when he finished, which gave us the difference of two, you see. But here was the President. He was concerned over whether history was going to record that he was interrupted--if these are the right figures--twenty-seven or twenty-nine times. And then he took that speech and read to us some of

the lines that got the most applause.

(Interruption)

F: You said on that trip--

R: Well, we got squared away on how many times he had been interrupted for applause, and then he took the script from Jack Valenti and read, with emphasis, portions of the speech to us.

F: Must have been quite a performance.

R: He wanted to make sure we got the story. He'd say, "Now did you get this?" and, "Back here I said this and that."

F: Almost a little boy pride, wasn't it?

R: This was the unveiling of the Great Society. It wasn't absolutely the first time he had used the term. He'd used it, he'd talked about a great society in a Rose Garden speech a little before that, but this was the big unveiling of The Great Society with a capital T and his own program, the program he was going to run on that fall.

But he was abolutely covered with sweat and probably pretty tired. I think we flew out there fairly early in the day, and it was kind of a rough, big crowd situation. He was probably tired as hell, but just absolutely buoyant in spirit and very expansive and spent most of that trip talking to us. And sometimes--this always tickled me. It happened more than once, He would usually stand when he was

talking to the poolers. He'd stand at the table. They always gave us facing seats with tables so we could use our typewriters. He would stand at that table sometimes, and we would get to Washington or wherever we were going and he'd still be talking. The pilot would turn the light on for seat belts and we would all buckle up for safety, and the President would go right on talking. The plane would go into its approach and finally, at the last minute . . . There was one landing where he never sat down. He held on, walked back a few seats, and then the plane was actually landing and he held on.

But he, as you know, could be, and at times was, a compulsive talker, and when he was a compulsive talker, mostly, was when he was in this buoyant, euphoric mood after giving a speech or when things were going right for him. And of course during all that great first year that I say was so euphoric, the Vietnam thing was still just a cloud no bigger than a man's hand. It hadn't begun to . . .

F: And we believed in containment in those days too.

R: Yes, there was no great dissent over it. It hadn't begun to burden him and weigh him down the way it did later.

F: Did these peripatetic press conferences at the White House just grow or do you think they were designed, when he'd get out and walked around with his retinue following?

R: Well, who knows? It's a matter of mind reading. Whether it was a strictly spontaneous thing the very first time, I don't know. It

seems to me the first time we did it, we were told, "The President wants to see you guys and you might take a little walk." And maybe that's all he said to his press secretary. I think if was [Pierre] Salinger then. He might have just picked up the phone and it was a nice day and said, "Send in whoever's out in the lobby or in the press room, and I think I'll take a little walk with them." So I don't know whether it was spur of the moment or not, but it made a good story.

F: Yes.

R: And there's nobody who liked a good story better than he did. It was a miserable format as far as we were concerned, because--

F: There's no way to take notes.

R: --there would be maybe thirty or forty of us, depending on how much of a surprise it was. They were always of course unscheduled. But out of thirty or forty people, not more than four or five can be within real clear hearing, within earshot, so it was a struggle to get close enough to him to hear what he was saying. And you felt a little foolish, like following the Pied Piper of Hamlin. Of course, there was the famous incident where Pete Lisagor of the Chicago Daily News was walking along taking notes, looking at his notebook instead of where he was going, and he walked into a lightpost out on that circular driveway back of the White House and, really, damned near knocked himself out. Johnson later gave him a Purple Heart. When we got back up to Johnson's office he gave him a phony Purple Heart for injuries in the line of duty.

F: Wear it with pride?

R: Yes.

F: Did you cover in person some of the campaign trips?

R: Oh, yes. I covered all of his campaign except for ten days that I spent with Goldwater. We changed off for one ten-day period.

F: From your own sense of crowd reaction, did you have any doubts that it was going to be a landslide?

R: No, no. I'm very wary of crowd figures and even, to some extent, of crowd reactions, but he was a fantastically popular president then and Goldwater was saying all the wrong things. It became more and more apparent that it was going to be an overwhelming victory. Of all the crowds, not the biggest, but I think the one he got the biggest kick out of was in Phoenix, Goldwater's home town. That stop hadn't been planned very long in advance. We went into Phoenix on a Sunday morning, and he got a fantastic street crowd right there in Barry Goldwater's home town. Didn't do any real campaigning because it was a Sunday, but did the hand-shaking bit. He got out and shook hands, stopped at a church. I think he could have carried Arizona if he had really. . .

F: Cared to work a little bit.

R: Yes, if he had wanted to stump the state, I think he could have carried Goldwater's home state, even. But, again, when the crowds were with him, I don't remember a president who got such a charge out of a crowd cheering him as Johnson did.

F: Well, now, you witnessed the other side. Do you think that he really retreated from the crowds in the latter part, or do you think this was pretty much just his security forces trying to keep him away from people? In other words, was he a prisoner, or his own prisoner?

R: Well, I think it's a myth that the Secret Service orders the President to do this or that. After all, he makes . . .

F: Yes. He's the President.

R: He's the President, Commander-in-Chief and everything else. You often see it written that the Secret Service ordered him to do this or that.

But he just got hemmed in more and more, found that if his appearance anywhere was announced in advance that that gave the anti-Vietnam people time to get out a picket line and their placards and to harass him. So it reached a point where he would never announce a trip in advance, and it also got to the point where he wouldn't tell a group inviting him that he was coming. Because when you tell a group that you're coming, that's tantamount to announcing it. They are going to put out the word. The local police are going to put out the word to local reporters and so on. So this is why in the last couple of years, anyway, he kept hundreds of organizations waiting until the last minute. And then, even on quickie, surprise appearances sometimes, there would still be a show of hostility. We were in Austin once in his home state. It was during the last year, for that birthday party for

John Connally, and it was not announced that he was going to go to that birthday, or farewell, whichever it was, for Connally.

F: It was his birthday.

R: And he went onto the University of Texas campus and by the time he got there, although it was not announced he was going, enough of those kids had deduced that he was going to be there, and there were three or four hundred students, very hostile, and with signs that they had had time to prepare. He wound up having to go in a side door and leave by the back door and there was a scuffle as he left the back door, and they had to arrest a couple of kids. So it got to the point where he couldn't go out in public--even in Austin--without creating a kind of nasty, confrontation situation with anti-Vietnam people.

F: Did this secrecy and this failure to make public any plans heighten press irritations? It must have done something to schedules and planning in your own office and telling your wife where you're going to be and so on.

R: Oh, it did, it did. It became a nightmare, because we wouldn't get word on a trip sometimes until literally two hours before we left. If it were, let's say, an out-and-back trip, as we call them, to some place close by like New York or Pittsburgh, we would simply be told that, "The President is going to make a trip. The check-in time at Andrews will be one p.m.; it's eleven o'clock now. There will be sandwiches aboard the plane and that's all we can tell you."

F: And you go not knowing where you're going.

R: You go out there not knowing where you were going. We wouldn't be told until we were airborne, and we might or might not get home for dinner.

F: Yes.

R: And even on longer trips, we would be told, "The President is going to make a trip tomorrow, but this is off the record and we will put up a sign up list." And you signed up to make a trip, you knew not where. Of course, the classic example is the trip that started out to be a trip to the Australian Prime Minister's funeral or memorial service--

F: Harold Holt.

R: Holt--and wound up being a trip around the world.

F: Were you along?

R: Yes.

F: When did you realize, or did you realize at the outset, that it was more than a funeral trip?

R: Well, at Hawaii. When we stopped at Hawaii to refuel, the story got back to us that there was some activity going on in Rome, that the President might stop at the Vatican, and we knew that this would suggest going around the world.

F: Now, taking in a variety of climates and so forth and conditions on a situation like that, do you have any kind of a briefing on what to take?

R: Yes, that would be a part of the off the record briefing. Sometimes it would be good news, like, "Take swimming suits."

F: Yes.

R: Or sometimes it would be, "Better bring along some warm clothing." Sometimes it would be, "You'd better pack for four or five days," instead of just overnight. The press office tried to give us guidance, but they knew they couldn't put out the whole story or it would get on the wires and then there would be a nasty crowd. Some of the correspondents got pretty sore and said, "Well, he's just using security as an excuse for keeping all of his options open and keeping us off balance." But I think security, or at least the desire not to be hissed and booed, was the main reason for most of his unpredictability and the uncertainty about his movements, the secrecy surrounding them, in those last couple of years.

F: Did the trip around the world seem to go off all right, without any particular incidents? I mean, I know what happened publicly.

R: Considering how hastily it was laid on, I guess it went pretty well. But there was literally almost no sleep on that trip for us except sleep we got aboard the plane. There were two nights that we were scheduled to sleep, but what with crossing date lines and time changes, we didn't get those nights' sleep. One night that we were supposed to sleep was in Australia, and we spent most of that night--or at least I did--writing. And then we were supposed to sleep in Thailand the night before he flew over to Cam Ranh Bay, and we were under wraps there. We couldn't file from there that he

was going to Vietnam, although we had all deduced it, that he wasn't going to go to Thailand without going to Vietnam. Then we heard on the Armed Forces Radio that President Johnson is spending the night at an air force base in Thailand tonight and tomorrow will visit Vietnam. I think they even said Cam Ranh Bay. So then, we had programmed a few hours sleep there, but suddenly we all had to file because the embargo then was lifted, because the Armed Forces Radio had broken it.

F: Did they break the news, I mean, in the sense of breaking security or breaking a deadline on that?

R: In a sense, it was embargoed. But there is always somebody who doesn't get the word, and in this case it was one of the government's own news services. So that wiped out--

F: Security.

R: --that night's sleep. Well, it wiped out security, too. But on a trip like that, you get so the plane is home. You normally think of an airplane as something you just want to spend a little time on and then get off and go somewhere and rest, but the situation gets completely turned around. You begin to look upon the airplane--

F: You see it as your security blanket.

R: --like the mother's womb. You want to get back to that plane because you know you can get in a reclining chair and order a drink and put on a sleep mask and pull up a blanket and get a little sleep.

F: Yes.

R: It becomes the most comfortable place that you've got available.

F: Going back to 1964, we've come up to this two or three times and never have returned to it.

R: Oh, there's a cute crack that I want to tell you. You get that feeling that this must be Tuesday because we're in Vietnam or whatever. You lose all sense of where you are and what day of the week it is. When we landed in Pakistan on the way back on the stop between Vietnam and Rome, as we got off the plane--we were just beginning to come back from around the world--one of the guys said, "God, I never thought when I got to Karachi I'd feel I was almost home."

F: (Laughter) I see. Very good. Did you get any foreshadowings that the President might take himself out in 1964 as he said in the Walter Cronkite interview?

R: No, no, I did not. This is an instance where what he now says, or what he said to Walter Cronkite in that interview, strains my credulity to and beyond the breaking point. I've already said that from the minute the thirty day mourning period for Kennedy ended, he was running. Every trip he made that year had political overtones. He was running long before the convention. There was never a case where the White House had such direct control over a convention, where it was almost stage managed from the White House. Marvin Watson was Johnson's stage manager at Atlantic City. I just cannot accept that all of those preparations were made for that

coronation--it was more like a coronation than a convention--and that he was really thinking of pulling out. And with Goldwater his obvious opponent and this opportunity to win the presidency in his own name. . . And he had not yet suffered much abuse from the press in that first year. I just cannot accept for a minute that up until the day he named Humphrey as his running mate, or that on the day--as he tells it--that he picked Humphrey as his running mate, that he was drafting a memo saying that he wouldn't run.

F: Did you ever have any reason to take seriously the possibility that either Senator [Thomas J.] Dodd or Senator [Eugene] McCarthy might be the running mate?

R: I didn't think he would pick Dodd and I still can't understand why he injected him into that charade of bringing him down from Atlantic City with Hubert.

F: I can make an educated guess, as I'm sure you can, too. Dodd was running and it gave him exposure in the New York Times.

R: Yes. It put his name on page one. Gene McCarthy, I had to think seriously about that one. But anybody who thought he was going to pick a senator from Minnesota, who knew the history of his relations with Hubert, how they had become friends in the Senate, how they had worked together, I think, couldn't have really believed that he was going to pick Gene McCarthy, who is not nearly the work horse that Humphrey was and is. I couldn't believe that he would pick a sort of dreamy--

F: Kind of a fey character in a way.

R: --fey, vaporous, idealistic character like McCarthy as his running mate when he had a real bona fide, certified, hard-working northern liberal, civil rights man, friend of labor, et cetera, to balance the ticket and to do a lot of work for him as vice president, which Humphrey eventually did. No, I thought it was going to be Humphrey, and the Dodd and McCarthy things looked like an effort on his part to add a little suspense. I'm still convinced that's what they were, that he had no hesitation about running.

F: There's some charge that most of the press could not swallow Goldwater and consequently had no alternative but Johnson, and that Johnson did have a social program that was admirable so the press was friendly through the election, and that then, knowing once they had Goldwater disposed of and presumably right-wing politics allayed for a while, that the press then thought, "We'll gut Mr. Johnson over the next four years because he's not our type of person either. He was just the lesser of evils." Do you think there is anything in the way of a press conspiracy?

R: No, I don't.

F: Or a conscious turning on him?

R: If you're talking about the working press.

F: Yes.

R: Well, either the owner-publisher side of the press or the working press, I don't think in either case that was true. I don't think the press works that way. The truth is, a lot of reporters liked Goldwater, who was a hell of a likeable guy.

F: He's the best copy you ever had.

R: He was kind of fun to be around and had a good sense of humor. It's certainly true that most reporters, when they pulled the curtain in the voting booth, I'm sure 98 per cent of American newspapermen or Washington correspondents voted for Johnson. But the working press, the White House correspondents don't, either consciously or unconsciously, make decisions such as you have described. "Well, we got rid of Goldwater. Now we don't like this guy either; let's get rid of him." It just doesn't work that way. What did begin to work, I think, is that the credibility gap began to open, and this is something that reporters do feel deeply about. They have been exposed more and more to Johnson, and his personality in the long run becomes kind of abrasive. He's demanding of the loyalty; reporters don't want to be loyal to anybody.

F: He's not satisfied.

R: He's not satisfied; he's thin-skinned; he's complaining to us. And while all of this is going on, we're getting more and more evidence of the White House being misleading or deceiving us, or the President literally uttering untruths. That record is getting longer and longer. It's piling up.

F: Did the President, to your knowledge, ever consciously lie to you, something that you can pretty well pin down?

R: Take some of the instances in the credibility gap. Somebody's got to make a judgment about whether he was telling the truth. When

we had the aluminum price increase, and the White House announced that it was going to unload its aluminum stocks--aluminum from its stockpile--with the very obvious, and incidentally successful, purpose of bringing about a rollback in aluminum prices, we asked the White House, which is President Johnson, "Is there any connection between these two moves?" and the White House said, "Absolutely none." On the Asian trip, Bill Moyers went around and told us Johnson was going to take part in the 1966 congressional campaign. He told me because I had a weekend deadline coming up, and I had asked him earlier, "Is the President going to do any campaigning on behalf of congressional candidates?" He got me about Friday wherever we we were, in Thailand or someplace, and said, "Yes, he is. He's going to go back and campaign from coast to coast. It will be twelve speeches in eight or ten states"--something like that--"starting in Boston and winding up in California." The President later denied that he had any plans for a campaign trip. When he got back, as you know, he went into the hospital. Well, all right, let's say the decision to go into the hospital changed his plans, but to deny, to maintain with a straight face, that he never had any plans to campaign, to go out on behalf of congressional candidates simply was not true. I mean, in Chicago, they had the "Welcome, Mr. President" signs already painted. They didn't just imagine that he was coming. He had planned a coast-to-coast trip and later denied that he had any such plans.

F: You must have asked Moyers about that. What does he say in a case like that?

R: Well, he'd shrug his shoulders and grin.

F: Sort of ruefully?

R: "This is the kind of thing I have to live with," was the message he conveyed with that grin.

F: Did you get a feeling or did you notice any substantial difference in press relations under his several press secretaries, or did Johnson himself pretty well determine the tone of press relations?

R: No, they varied.

F: Which ones could you work with best? Of course, you had Salinger inherited.

R: They varied pretty widely. With Pierre to start with, Johnson was feeling his way. He was trying to develop an entirely--he was trying almost to be his own press secretary. Perhaps he didn't trust Pierre entirely. So we were seeing a lot of the President.

Then he brought in George Reedy. Not too long after George came in or about the time he came in, we had the speeding incident down in Texas, where the President, according to several photographers who trailed his car, drove eighty or more miles an hour down a Texas road. We had been his guests at the Ranch that day, and he thought, maybe with some justification, that this was a violation of his hospitality, to go out and have barbecued ribs with him and drink his beer and then write a story that hurt him.

He felt it was a violation of his hospitality for us to go to that sort of a party at the Ranch and then turn around and write that he drove eighty miles an hour. There was a cooling of his press relations, a cooling of his effort to cultivate the press after that incident. There was a long period of sort of relative silence, where he was fairly withdrawn. Looking back on it, I think during that period the credibility gap opened a little wider.

I think Bill Moyers, when he first came in, was very good for Johnson because he was very accessible to us. George had reached the point where he was impossible. He was afraid to say anything, tell you anything. He'd hardly go beyond the daily schedule in what he would put out. Bill came in: he was very articulate and would tell you not only what the President was doing, but what he was thinking and what he might do and his reasons for doing the things he did. He was interpreting the President to us and since he had so much access to him, his guidance was good. Occasionally he would even quote him--LBJ told me this or he told me that. It was good. Besides that, Bill was a very pleasant guy. So Johnson's press relations improved without a doubt under Moyers, and I think the credibility gap closed a little. But there's an irony in that because after Moyers got there, Johnson's popularity started to go down in the polls. As you know, I guess, by the time Bill left, he was not the Johnson favorite that he had been, by any means. The President once remarked to me that it was a funny thing, when

Bill Moyers became his press secretary, his own popularity was at an all time high, and nobody had heard of Bill Moyers. When Bill Moyers left, Bill Moyers was a world celebrity, and his, the President's, popularity was at an all time low.

F: I see. And he thought he saw a connection.

R: So in the end, I thought Bill was bad for him by interpreting him too much, and perhaps by trying to be helpful to us. I also think he felt Bill was too ambitious, that he was sometimes working for Bill Moyers instead of the President.

F: George Christian got a good press after he came in and rather cooled things, in a sense. I often wondered, though, if this was because of a lack of any sort of extrapolitions or any interpretation on George's part, or if he just told what he knew, nothing more and nothing less.

R: Well, I think in retrospect George may have been, for Lyndon Johnson, the best of the four because George was not trying to establish himself as any kind of celebrity. He is a self-effacing guy.

F: A little in the Walter Jenkins mold.

R: Yes, I think so, willing to be a background figure. Now Bill Moyer, let's face it, was ambitious, and he used that daily forum to help Bill Moyers quite a bit. George Christian had a way of telling us what he could within the framework of what he knew the

President wanted put out, and then turning off questions. If you pressed him, he'd go back and try to get some more. If you had to see the President about something, he'd get you in to see him. But I think George discouraged the President fraternizing, let's say, with reporters. At the end, with George there, we finally got it more like the Eisenhower pattern, or what is now the Nixon pattern, of press secretary being the spokesman, but not an interpreter and mind reader and anticipator of the President--a sort of unobtrusive spokesman and a guy who helps you as much as he can, but at the same time doesn't go beyond what the President wants said.

F: Within your experience, who has been the best press secretary?

R: I think maybe it would be between Hagerty and George Christian.

F: Johnson had no trouble at all with the press as far as the interpretation of the Walter Jenkins incident was concerned?

R: No, he didn't. I was actually with Goldwater when that story broke. It was October of 1964, wasn't it?--pretty late in the campaign. In the Goldwater camp there was not a feeling that, "Wow, this is a great, hot campaign issue."

F: No jubilations?

R: No, except on the part of one guy, Clark Mollenhoff, then of the Des Moines Register-Tribune, now counsel, or something,to Nixon.

I remember we were in the Brown Palace Hotel and he was practically jumping for joy when this story came through, and he claimed to have great advance knowledge of it. But basically, the reaction of the press there and, I'm sure, the people who were with Johnson--I was off of his campaign for those ten days--was that this was a great human tragedy. The press certainly didn't try to exploit it. Goldwater said he wasn't going to. However, a couple of days later he was down in Texas talking about "that funny crowd at the White House," so he didn't quite stick to his word on that.

That reminds me of an aside about Johnson and the press. I went back over to the Johnson campaign, and by the time I got over there, he had not made any comment on the Jenkins thing and nobody thought he was going to. We got out to San Diego, and he was in this euphoric mood. He'd been facing big crowds all day and getting big responses and was all charged up. A guy from a local San Diego station put a little pencil microphone attached to a tape recorder in front of his mouth as he got off his airplane and asked him what he thought about the Walter Jenkins' case, and he started talking about it. He said, "We know a lot about people on their side, a lot of information that we're not using."

We got the tape and listened to it and had to write a story that Johnson had finally reacted angrily to it and had, in effect,

threatened to hit the Republicans over the head with similar instances that he knew of, but had never intended to use. Quite often, when he wasn't being accessible to us, some local guy would step up with a microphone, and he had a hard time resisting an open mike.

F: Did you have pretty good access to him? If you really had something burning or some special assignment, could you get to see him pretty quickly?

R: Yes, most of the time. But there were long periods when he had been burned, like after the speeding stories that came out of Texas, when he was unavailable. During a period where he felt the press was after him, there would be times when he would not be accessible. Then sometimes after a story in an individual publication or on a network that he didn't like, that he thought reflected hostility on the part of either the reporter or his publication, you'd be in a kind of doghouse for a while.

Tape 3 of 3

F: You must have had several off the record interviews with President Johnson. First of all, let's talk about off the record. How do you handle that?

R: Well, quite often I'd be working on, say, a cover story. One I've got in front of me here was in early February of 1965. He had just

been re-elected, sworn in as his own president, and I was going to do a cover story on the men around him, on his staff. I asked for time with him and went in on February 3 of 1965 and spent ninety minutes with him.

F: Now, about that time that he had kept [Nicholas] Katzenbach waiting for a long time, or kept everybody waiting, for the position of attorney general. Katzenbach was a logical successor, but not necessarily confirmed.

R: Actually, he had just named Nick as attorney general, but he had kept him waiting for a hundred and forty-eight days before naming him.

F: Why?

R: As we wound up that talk. . . Now, I'm looking at the memo.

F: Your memo of the meeting with President Johnson?

R: Yes, an off the record meeting, February 3, 1965. He stuck it in the press a little for writing stories that he had embarrassed Katzenbach by keeping him waiting for a hundred and forty-eight days before making him a full-fledged attorney general. This is what he said, these are the quotes that I wrote in my memo, "When Bobby Kennedy came in here last September and sat right where you're sitting and told me he was quitting, he asked me for three favors. One of them was a judge he wanted appointed in Massachusetts; one of them was a case he was interested in down

South; and one of them was would I let Nick Katzenbach fill out the rest of his term as attorney general. Bobby said that Katzenbach had worked over there for three years, and he knew he would be pleased to wind up as attorney general. I told him of course I would, because I thought he was a good man and that I had plenty of time if I got re-elected to pick a new man. That was fine. That was our understanding. Then after I won I talked to Katzenbach. I told him that I had several people in mind for the job, but I was interested in him, too. Did he want the job? He said, 'Yes,' he did. I asked him if he would be interested in another job, a job not in the Cabinet. He was willing to take that, too, and that pleased me. So I thought it over for a while, who would be best in what job, and just about decided that Katzenbach was my man. I decided to ask him down for dinner and talk to him again and talk to his wife."

And here he said something about he wanted to see how she thought and what she thought about other Cabinet wives.

F: Why would he want to talk with Mrs. Katzenbach? Was this normal procedure?

R: It was. He loved to size up the wives of these guys. I know he did it on Jack Connor, when he appointed him Secretary of Commerce.

He always wanted to get an idea of how the man's wife would fit into official Washington.

Then he went on, "After we had dinner"--this is Johnson again--"and talked a while, I told him that I was pleased to offer him the appointment as my attorney general, and he was delighted. There was never any misunderstanding."

F: Do you think he ever seriously considered anyone other than Katzenbach to be attorney general?

R: Well, I don't know--

F: Or was he just kind of feeling the pulse?

R: I don't know. He was the kind of guy who was capable of keeping a guy like Nick, who obviously wanted the job, guessing.

F: Do you know Katzenbach?

R: Yes.

F: Well, was he on kind of tenterhooks at that time?

R: He was on tippy toes. He wanted to be attorney general from the day Bobby resigned.

F: From the day it was available?

R: Yes. And he was deputy attorney general. But Johnson finished out the rest of Kennedy's term and then waited until he got re-elected, and then finally, after one hundred forty-eight days, named him. It was kind of typical in a way. A lot of people thought it was rough on Nick, like it took Johnson one hundred and forty-eight days to make up his mind whether Katzenbach was up to doing the job.

F: Do you think that has interfered at all with Katzenbach's performance in his job as attorney general? Did it lower his status in the Justice Department?

R: No, I don't think so. That Justice Department was pretty much a Kennedy operation and Nick was a Kennedy man and the fact that he ultimately named--

F: But there wasn't any question of loyalty here? Katzenbach was ready to serve the President, whoever he might be.

R: No. Not with Nick. Of course after that Katzenbach is one of the guys that he asked to resign a full-fledged Cabinet job to go over and take a second-echelon job.

F: Do you have insights on that movement into the State Department? Did he want Ramsey [Clark], particularly? Or did he want Katzenbach over there in the State Department to organize things while Rusk made policy?

R: I think he wanted Nick over there as an administrator, as a strong back-up man to Rusk, to let Rusk do a lot of thinking, and Nick to kind of organize the department and keep the papers moving.

F: To administer, in other words.

R: Yes. Every president has always wanted somebody in the State Department to make it work and no president has ever gotten one, as far as I know.

F: Well, within your purview has the President ever been entirely satisfied with the State Department's operations?

R: Has any president?

F: Within your personal [recollection]?

R: Well, I think Ike was--

F: With [John Foster] Dulles?

R: With Dulles because Dulles was the State Department as far as he was concerned. Ike never called up the assistant secretary for Latin American Affairs and asked him, "What the hell is going on in Panama?"

F: Did Johnson as far as you know?

R: Oh, yes. Kennedy, Johnson dealt most of the time--

F: They dealt with the people like Tom Mann?

R: --with second, third echelon people, desk officers even.

F: Yes.

R: They'd call them up and say, "What's going on there?" So they had much more of a feel of how immovable, how slow-moving, the State Department was, and I think that's why both Kennedy and Johnson had a very strong man in the NSC job at the White House. Ike did not have strong men in the McGeorge Bundy, Walt Rostow, NSC job. He had guys there that he would see maybe a couple or three times a week, and they'd make up the agenda for the NSC meetings. But both Kennedy and Johnson wanted in the White House a man who could move a lot faster than that cumbersome machinery over at State, get them information, make them a recommendation.

F: In your view, does the State Department have a sort of overlay of

bureaucrats who are almost unassailable and therefore untouchable, toward whom you are unable to make any movements? Can it almost run independently of an administration?

R: Well, not with an alert president. But what it does, it just lags behind an alert president. It's a big, cumbersome, tradition-ridden organization that goes by the book and is weighted down with paperwork. When you get in the White House a guy like Kennedy or Johnson, he wants somebody at his right elbow who can get him answers a lot faster than he can get them out of the State Department.

F: In your view, did he pick Katzenbach to be under secretary of state because of his knowledge of the intricacies of diplomacy, or simply because he was a good manager?

R: I think he thought he was a good manager and a guy who got things done, decisive, a guy who made wheels turn. I think that was his experience.

F: Did you get any feeling that Ramsey Clark elbowed Katzenbach out of the attorney generalship?

R: No. I don't have that feeling. I think Johnson liked Ramsey Clark, was an old friend of his father and wanted to make him a Cabinet officer, and it happened that at the same time he thought Katzenbach would be a very useful guy to sort of back up Rusk.

F: As far as you know, there was no opposition from Rusk on this? No feeling that Katzenbach is an intrusion on his prerogatives?

R: No. No, I don't think so.

F: You made a trip to Chicago with the President in which he talked

about "nervous nellies." Can you elaborate on that?

R: Well, it was the trip he made out to Chicago in May of 1966, a little more than a year after the Vietnam escalation when he was just really getting into trouble on that. Criticism was mounting. I flew out on his plane, again, as a pooler, and going out there-- This was the speech in which he was in McCormick Place before a Democratic fund-raising dinner, and he made headlines by this kind of intemperate attack on his critics, people who wanted to quit Vietnam, as "nervous nellies."

F: Was this in the script, or was it ad lib?

R: No, that was an ad lib. He was losing that audience. It was a bunch of Democrats. They'd had a lot to drink, a long evening of entertainment. Finally, the President came on, and he was reading his set speech which was written like it was to be carved in stone, you know, a very dull speech. He threw out a couple of audience response questions to his audience, which required them to shout back, "yes" or "no." And then he got wound up a little farther and he called his critics "nervous nellies."

But while we were flying out there, to some of us on the plane, he laid out what he considered his options to be in Vietnam, and I wrote them down. I think I got them verbatim, and to me it was much clearer than anything he had said in any of his speeches. I'm reading from my notes on that. This was in May, 1966. He said, "I've got four alternatives. The first one is to escalate. We could completely demolish them."--meaning North Vietnam--"We could have a million men there so fast it would make your head swim.

We've got the men, the machines, the armor to flatten them, but there's not 10 per cent of the country that would support that kind of a war, and we've got to think about what the rest of the world would say. So that's out."

And he went on, "The second alternative is to tuck tail." And here he wrote the word "tuck" on a memo pad in front of him. "We could stick our tails between our legs and run for cover. That would just whet the enemy's appetite for greater aggression and more territory, and solve nothing."

Then he went on, "The third alternative is the enclave idea, recommended by some experts like George Kennan"--he pronounced it Keenan--"and General [James] Gavin. Well, that's like a jackass hunkering up in a hailstorm. We could stay there the rest of our lives. It would be expensive and prove nothing."

"The fourth alternative," he finally concluded, "is what we're doing: pressure with restraint, making this aggression so expensive to the enemy that he will sooner or later learn that we mean to stay there until those people are free. This is costly. But when you consider that since the end of World War II from Greece to Vietnam, we've suffered a hundred and sixty thousand casualties, what we're fighting for now is worth the cost." Those were the four options as he talked about them.

F: Did he ever express to you subsequently any doubts as to the wisdom or the validity of the policy he was following?

R: No, no. No. I can't say that he did. When he first cut back the

bombing of North Vietnam it didn't come as a total surprise because by this time he was under so much pressure, especially from within his own party, that there were so many people saying, "We've got to try something else. We've got to do something different." But I never heard him, I must say, say, "I think we've got to try something else."

F: Did you see him during the period of the Tet offensive, which evidently was something of a traumatic experience?

R: Well, I did. I've got a memo here of a talk with him.

F: Is this when you had the five or six hour experience?

R: No, I talked to him for an hour and a half on the night of February 2, 1965, and at that time--

F: At that time, he was still fairly popular.

R: He was. Oh, yes he was still fairly popular.

F: Riding high.

R: Oh, wait a minute. This would not have been after the Tet offensive.

F: No, the Tet offensive came in the beginning of 1968.

R: Yes. No, this was . . .

F: Well, what happened in 1965?

R: Well, this was a talk mostly about people on his staff.

F: Did he give you, more or less, thumbnail estimates of them?

R: A thumbnail estimate of each guy--

F: That'd be interesting to--

R: --on his staff. He compared his staff to FDR's, said that his

staff was pretty much modeled after Roosevelt's and--

F: Not after Kennedy's, but after Roosevelt's?

R: After Roosevelt's. And he went down each one of them, and it was just pretty much undiluted praise for each guy and what he was doing. It included, at that time, still a lot of Kennedy people. I had told him I wanted to talk about the people around him. The first one he mentioned was Lee White, who was then special counsel. He talked about his experience of working on the Hill for John Sherman Cooper, and then three years for Kennedy under Ted Sorensen and Mike [Myer] Feldman, and said you just can't find a man with experience like that and ticked off all the areas in which he was expert. He talked about how many messages they had been able to prepare for him to get up to Congress, sent up twelve special messages in January of that year alone. He said, quote, "This is the first time in the history of this Republic that's ever been done: twelve major messages in one month, in addition to a State of the Union Message and an Inaugural Address."

F: Did you get the feeling he was kind of entranced with statistics?

R: Oh, yes, and he had them at his fingertip. He took off on a long encomium for Bill Hopkins, who's been the executive clerk at the White House for about a hundred years, called him the real backbone of the staff, the kind of man that makes you proud you're an American.

F: I see.

R: And then he talked about Kermit Gordon. He said, "He's one of the

people I rely on most, big enough for anybody's Cabinet, but you don't read much about him." Praise for Elmer Staats, "Knows just about everything there is to know about government. Sometimes I call him dozens of times a week to get a quick straight answer." Probably a little hyperbole in that.

F: Speaking of calling, and I don't want to get you off the thing, but didn't you have some occasion to witness Senator [Everett] Dirksen when the President had called him inordinately on Vietnam? When he claimed he did?

R: In the 1966 campaign, Dirksen was out in Illinois making speeches in the congressional campaign. He wasn't up that year, so it was whatever congressman had that district in northern Illinois. And he told a crowd up in Rockford that the President had called him three times that day on Vietnam, just kind of name-dropping, letting the crowd know how close he was to the throne. And I had occasion a few days after that, I was talking to Johnson privately about something, and I asked him why on earth he called Dirksen three times that day on Vietnam. He said, "Well, I called him three times, but I only got him once and what I was calling him about was not Vietnam, but an appointment to the Federal Home Loan Bank Board,"--the outfit that runs the savings and loan associations--"and I just wanted to tell him that I was going to name to the Board, a guy that he wanted to be appointed."

F: But Dirksen made it sound as if Johnson didn't make a move in Vietnam

without calling him.

R: Yes, I was amused to find out that he hadn't even been calling him about Vietnam. He was simply clearing with Dirksen, or breaking the good news to Dirksen, that the man Dirksen wanted named to one of the federal agencies was going to be a Dirksen-sponsored man. And, incidentally, Johnson appointed many, many Dirksen people to federal [posts.]

F: Not necessarily within Dirksen's constituency, but simply people Dirksen sponsored?

R: No, not all Illinoisans, but people Dirksen sponsored had a very high batting average on getting presidential appointments from LBJ.

F: Do you think this was just a way of placating Dirksen, enlisting him?

R: He wanted to keep him happy. So Dirksen, although he was a Republican, probably got many more appointees to federal boards and agencies than a lot of influential Democratic senators, partly because of their old friendship, I suppose, and partly because Dirksen was the minority leader, and Johnson figured he needed the minority leader and played ball with him.

F: There's a tendency to rationalize positions and to forget certain contradictory positions. I'm thinking of Senator [William] Fulbright, who may or may not be correct in this, but he's almost forgotten where he stood prior to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. From your vantage point, did Johnson strong-arm the Tonkin Resolution through, or was

this a popular acceptance at the time it came up?

R: Well, that happened pretty much on the Hill. You've got to remember that the stage was set for the Tonkin Gulf Resolution with attacks on U. S. forces, if they were attacks. The President once indicated to me he wasn't absolutely sure that in both cases they were torpedo boats. One time he said, talking about our destroyers, he said, "They might have been shooting at whales, for all I know." But the fact is that he set it up and then American public opinion was such that from where I sat, looking at it down at the White House, it didn't take a Fulbright to get that through. Fulbright endorsed it. There were only two votes against it. He didn't have to do any arm-twisting, really, with Fulbright.

F: It's only in retrospect you began to have your doubts.

R: Well, that Fulbright did. To me, the language of that resolution is completely unambiguous. It said what it meant and meant what it said, as Johnson used to say. It became ambiguous in Fulbright's mind later on, or he felt he had been misled on the Tonkin Gulf incidents.

F: Did Johnson ever talk with you about his television image, his inability, in a sense, to get across to the American public?

R: Well, yes. He knew he wasn't good at it.

F: You would agree that sitting down with just Charles Roberts and Newsweek, that Johnson could get a message across, that he could be moderately persuasive?

R: Fantastically!

F: He lost something when he did a set performance.

R: When he got before a camera with a prepared speech, he became a different Lyndon Johnson, totally different from the guy that you would sit down with in that family dining room or in the sitting room over at the White House, where he would tell stories and, you know, lucidly explain what [General William] Westmoreland was trying to do in Vietnam and so on.

F: Now, you spent six hours with him once, five or six, which was either a late lunch or an early dinner, in an off the record session. What took place at this time?

R: That was a case of where he took all three of the news magazines. Time, U. S. News [and World Report], and Newsweek had put in requests to see him.

F: He saw you all in a group?

R: He decided to take all three of us at once.

F: Did he play any favorites among you, that you could tell?

R: No, I don't think so. There were times when I saw him alone, and I'm sure there were times when he saw them all.

F: But not on the average.

R: Quite often, he saw all three news magazines at once, or he would see the three networks all at once, or he would see the two wire services. Then on individual request he would see individual reporters. It was this one instance where he got all three

magazines at once: Hugh Sidey, Jack Sutherland, and myself.

F: When was this?

R: We were going over there for lunch. I'd have to look up the date of it, but we were to go over for lunch. We met in the Cabinet Room, waited for him there because he was tied up, then went over to the family dining room. He left a couple of times to go up and to read some communications and then to see some people that Lady Bird had upstairs, the beautification group. George Reedy was still there. It was during the Reedy period. Reedy had to go over and do a four o'clock press briefing. So we'd gone, by then, from one o'clock to four o'clock.

F: You hadn't eaten yet?

R: Yes, we had lunch.

F: You had eaten.

R: And then it got on to five o'clock. We went down to his office, continued talking. Then we went from there into what we called the think tank, the little office off of his big office, wound up talking there for another half hour or so. A week or so later at a dinner, Drew Pearson asked me if the President was accessible, "Do you ever get to talk to him?" And I foolishly said, "Well, I was in there about five hours last week." The next time I saw the President privately, he practically grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and said, "You're going around telling people you spend six hours talking to me, and they're telling me I ought to do better things

with my time." So there was a dilemma: He wanted to spend this time with the press. He realized the importance of explaining what he was doing and getting his story across. But then he didn't want it written that he was spending hours with the press.

F: Okay, you get a lot of information out of this, since he is a fast talker, an informational talker. What'd you do with it?

R: Well, I'd write long, long files. Most of the time it would be so far off the record that I would wind up just writing long advisory memos to New York.

Now, I've got one in front of me; this is one from a talk with him right after the Tet offensive, or while the Tet offensive was still on, shortly after the Pueblo incident and while we were still embattled at Khe Sanh. The first paragraph of it will give you a little of the feeling of what sort of memo you could make out of this kind of a meeting with the President. This is dated February 2, 1968. "At four o'clock this afternoon, about four hours after his news conference, the President invited eleven newsmen, including me, to a late lunch or, as it turned out, an early dinner. The rules are that we never saw him, that nothing can be attributed to him or to the government sources. If anything from this memo is used, it must be used under the Lindley Rule. We simply write it from our own knowledge and on our own authority."

F: Is this Ernest Lindley?

R: Well, it's the old Lindley Rule that you write without any attribution, that it derives from--

F: And newsmen are ready to accept this sort of thing?

R: Yes. If you get an opportunity to talk to the President alone, or with ten other correspondents--

F: He specified who the eleven would be?

R: This was by invitation. Eleven would be less than all of the White House regulars, and still it wouldn't be too intimate a group.

But let me run over this. This may be of interest. "First, FYI [For Your Information], a couple of details. Though he said he got a good night's sleep last night, the President looked tired. He said, 'I just don't have enough eyes to read all the cables and the intelligence reports,' meaning the reports generated by the crises he had in January. He ticked off some of those crises--'Cambodia, a plane downed with four nuclear bombs; the Pueblo; the uprising in South Vietnam,'--the Tet offensive in other words. He had a four hundred and twenty-three calorie fish salad lunch." I remember, I know how many calories it was because he has a little card by his table, and the chef or the cook had written down the total of calories.

F: He ate accordingly.

R: "And then he went over that count by eating a bowl of peppered, sliced tomatoes and washing them down with a coffee-flavored milk-shake. The lunch was in the family dining room, upstairs in the Mansion with Walt Rostow at the foot of the table to supply an

occasional name or statistic. The first question was why had he called in General [Matthew] Ridgeway the day before, and he gave us a long explanation of that. He called in Ridgeway because he not only had experience in Korea, where he'd succeeded [Douglas] MacArthur, but he had a feel for the Koreans." This was in dealing, of course, with the Pueblo crisis. "He said he'd also discussed Vietnam deployments and troop levels with him."

F: With Ridgeway?

R: With Ridgeway. "And there may be a few changes there, he said, but basically Ridgeway was in agreement with everything we were doing, and the President said he had decided to call him in from time to time for advice."

The second question was what was Giap up to--the North Vietnamese General--"What was he planning? Johnson said he wished he knew all that was in Giap's mind. 'The present uprising,' he said, 'looks irrational in what it costs the Communists against what it gained. Maybe we've all over-estimated him,'--meaning Giap,--'but he didn't know. From all the evidence, Giap simply decided to change his strategy from a long war of attrition to one in which he puts in his whole stack at once.' This led Johnson into a long recitation of how good our intelligence was. He quoted from POW documents captured last fall, in which they had revealed their plans for that uprising in the cities. 'We knew he was going to do it, and he did it and it cost him like hell,'

Johnson said. 'Now we think he is going to hit us at Khe Sanh, but we're not saying this is a dying gasp.'"

Then it went back to North Korea, what are they up to? "Does the Pueblo incident fit into the Vietnam uprising plan? Johnson said he saw the Pueblo seizure as an irrational act by which the North Koreans hoped to divert us and thus help their Communist brothers in Vietnam and said the North Koreans were apparently trying to force South Korea to recall its two divisions from Vietnam and to keep them from sending over another one. He did not think the North Koreans were about to invade South Korea. 'They just saw an opportunity to help out in a way that didn't cost them anything, and they did it,' he said."

"The next questioner said that Johnson seemed to imply in his news conference, one that he had held earlier that day, that it would take a long time to get the Pueblo and its crew back. Johnson said he didn't mean to say that. 'Sometimes I don't put things right,' he said. 'You can blame me.' What he should have said is that it might take a week or it might take a year. What he knows, for sure, he said, is that we can't get them back by military force. 'We've had experience in this. We've had some of their prisoners. They've had some of ours. We have a lot of things we're going to do. We're going to the U.N. We're going back to Panmunjom. We're going to a lot of neutral capitals, and eventually, we will go to a hundred and ten countries. Our word is getting through.'"

"The reason he put the reference to the RB-47 fliers into his answer"--at the news conference, he had mentioned that it took seven months to get them back--"was that he wanted to put the needle in Nixon. 'Nixon,' he says, 'talks like a ten-year-old, when he says we should have sent the Pueblo in there with an armada of ships and an air cover. If you're going to send a detective up to a hotel room to listen under a door and peek through the keyhole, through the pee hole, then you don't send him up with a bunch of fire engines blinking their lights and sounding their sirens,' he said. 'You can't get intelligence with an armada of ships and air cover.' This was Johnson flaring up at Nixon's criticism of his handling of the affair."

F: You never got the feeling that he considered, at any moment, strong-arming his way in to rescue the Pueblo crew?

R: Absolutely not. I think one of the greatest myths about Johnson as a president is that he was not a deliberate man, that he reacted or over-reacted, that he shot from the hip. I honestly think that it was almost--he got caricatured so much as a--

F: A kind of sectional bias really. The long, tall Texan.

R: --Texan with a pistol on each hip, that people would get carried away with that stereotype and write about him as a guy who was fast on the draw. In my experience, having covered two presidents before him, he was more deliberate in every crisis you can name than his predecessors were. The best testimony on this that

I ever got came from Mac Bundy, who had served under Kennedy and who stayed on under Johnson. He wasn't Johnson's type of guy at all, but came to have a tremendous respect--

F: Maybe it was mutual.

R: --for his grasp of foreign affairs. Bundy said to me once, "Johnson may talk from the hip, but he doesn't shoot from the hip."

Anyway, I don't think for a minute that he ever contemplated any forcible effort to get that ship back. As a matter of fact, I'll go back to this memo on that Pueblo incident: "Johnson digressed into an answer to some other critics, those who lay it on him for not going in with force to get the ship back. 'He was glad,' he said, 'that that goddamned lieutenant general out there'--presumably the commanding general of the Fifth Air force--'didn't get his planes off the ground. If the planes had gone in at twelve hundred miles an hour, they couldn't drop a rope down to the Pueblo and have the crew climb up it. And if he'd got his forty planes into the air and gone out there in the snow and bad weather, they would have flown into a trap, because the North Koreans had seventy-six MIGs on an airfield twenty-five miles away, plus five hundred other planes around the country. They had the trap all set for us. Then when our planes got shot down, the same people who have called on me to use a nuclear bomb would be pressuring me togo to war.' He said, 'It would have been like the Bay of Pigs, where after we were licked, there were a lot of people who came to Kennedy and said we

should have had air cover.' Johnson said he had heard a lot of people complain about the Pueblo, but not many of them had many ideas about what they would have done if they were in his place. He said he had one Cabinet officer, who he didn't identify, pound on the table and say, 'We must have done something wrong,' and insist that Johnson tell him what we did wrong."

F: Do you have any idea who it was?

R: No, I don't. It could have been any of the dovish people.

F: You can get it down to four or five.

R: Yes, it could have been any of the dovish people. No, or it could have been a "let's go in and bomb them now" kind of guy. But he was asked next, looking at the memo again, "What about Bucher"--who was the commander of the Pueblo." Johnson said, 'I didn't sign his commission.' Then he sort of turned from anger to good humor. He said, 'He's a constituent of Carl Curtis and Roman Hruska.'" He was from Boys Town, from Nebraska, anyway. "He went on and said, 'But as far as I know, he was a good officer. Some people say he shouldn't have waited an hour and a half to tell us he was in real trouble, but his predecessor was on that station about twelve months and got harrassed seven times, and they, the Koreans, never fired a shot and tried to board him. If I had been there,' Johnson went on, 'knowing as much as I do as president, we might have been blown out of the water. Maybe we would have lost these eighty-three men. Maybe the Good Lord looked after him. Sometimes I think he's

looking after me. I've been on airplanes that caught fire, that crash landed, and ran off runways, and sometimes I think He'"--I wrote it with a capital H, so he obviously meant, again, the Good Lord--"'is looking after me. On the other hand maybe that boy'"--meaning Bucher--"'is a traitor, but I don't think he is. From the messages he got off to us, I think he did the best he could.'"

Then we asked him, somebody asked him, whether we had lost much valuable gear. "The President said we may have, but he thought the crew destroyed some gear and he really couldn't tell us much more there than what we had on the wires. He said Bucher had instructions, a checkoff list of what to do, like a, b, c, like you get up in the morning, go to the toilet, brush your teeth, and so on. Bucher was trying to do these things, but how far along he got we don't know. And somebody--"

F: Did you get the feeling that he looked on the Pueblo as something major, or just as an annoyance?

R: Oh, it was more of an annoyance, but he was impatient. He didn't want to escalate it, God knows, what with Vietnam on his hands. He was impatient as hell--

F: But it wasn't worth a major counterattack, in effect?

R: --with people like Nixon who were saying, "This would never happen to me if I were president." And he had a pretty good explanation of why we did it the way we did. If you're going on an intelligence

mission, you don't go in with red lights flashing and sirens sounding. You don't go in with an armada of ships.

F: And you don't involve your nation.

R: He wasn't playing it down, but I suppose you could say he was very defensive about it, about what we did and kind of resigned to the fact that it might take us a year or so to get that crew back, which it did.

But he was asked then what sort of contingency plans he had outlined to congressional leaders. "He didn't want to answer that at first. And then, realizing that some of the contengencies that he had talked about had been discussed by congressmen, he said, yes, he had told them that we might want to call up some specialists who were in the reserve." Well, he did, as you know. "'We need a few men with certain specialties,' he said. 'At this table, I might want just Max Frankel,' not all eleven of us--pointing to Max Frankel of the New York Times. He said he used to have the power to call up men like that from the ready reserve, but Congress had taken that power away from him. Now he might want to get it back. He went on to say that he'd been under a lot of pressure to call up big reserves like whole National Guard divisions."

F: Why Max Frankel in this case? Just the power of the Times?

R: No, I think it was [that] Max may have been the first guy that he saw as he looked down the table as he was talking to us. Of course, he had a lot of respect for Max.

F: But no real significance to singling out Max?

R: No. He'd often use a name of a correspondent to make a little joke.

F: He was, in a sense, great at personalizing points.

R: Let's see. "He told us he estimated that he had talked with one hundred members of Congress in twelve separate meetings since the Pueblo incident. Telling us this led him into a discussion of what a good job Rusk, McNamara, Wheeler, Clifford have done in keeping those people,"--meaning Congress,--"informed, especially Clifford." He singled him out. "He said, 'McNamara can say more in less time than any man he knows, but Clifford can say it better than anybody.'" I think that's a good comparison of his two defense secretaries.

F: Did you get the feeling he was sort of entranced with McNamara's rapid brain?

R: Oh, yes, yes, no question about that. But I think a mutual disenchantment began to set in there towards the end of McNamara's time in the Pentagon, as evidenced by the fact that when McNamara said he might want out, Johnson took him up on it.

There's another line here about Clifford: "McNamara can say more in less time than any man Johnson knew, but Clifford can say it better than anybody. He said, 'It's really something to hear that man talk. You can see just where every semicolon and every exclamation point belongs.'"

F: That's right.

R: This brought up something about his relations with the media that may conceivably be of interest. "He said this reminded him; he turned to Ray Scherer of NBC and said, 'Ray, why don't you call up your network and tell them they ought to put Rusk and McNamara on TV for an hour to answer questions? The people shouldn't have to go to public television'"--meaning NET--"'or get Arthur Schlesinger's permission to hear their own Cabinet officers. There are a lot of questions people would like to hear answered.' And he, that is Johnson, would like to see it done by commercial, free-enterprising TV. 'If TV isn't good for that, what's it good for?' He wouldn't even mind if they sold a few Chesterfields during the station breaks."

F: That dates him.

R: "Then he said, 'Some networks--CBS or ABC, if NBC won't do it, or all three of them together--ought to get a good panel of newsmen, make them brief themselves, '"--that is, the reporters--"'and then put these two guys on to answer questions the public wants answered.' Dan Rather of CBS asked, 'Well, are Rusk and McNamara available?' And Johnson said, 'They don't know it, but I'll tell them they are,' grinning uncontrollably," I put it in my notes. As you know, all three networks then went to work on it, and they did have a Q and A show on the Pueblo.

"We asked him about Ho's intentions, and he said he didn't know what kind of information Ho was getting. He pointed out he was

an old man. He said, 'If they're telling it straight to Ho, then he may have to negotiate before next November'"--that would be November of 1968, of course--"'If I were him and know what I know,' Johnson said, "I'd negotiate now.' But"--I added in my notes--"Johnson sometimes wonders whether Ho is getting full information."

F: Did you get the feeling--Johnson, of course, was supposed to be a master of--almost a gambler in effect--in his knowledge of human nature, when he was Senate majority leader, in how fast and how far he could push you, what your limits were, and so on. Did you get the feeling he ever understood what I call the personalia of the enemy?

R: No, no. I think this was the major miscalculation of the whole damn country. The President, the Pentagon, the State Department, and everybody else thought if we made it real tough on the North Vietnamese that they would cry uncle, and they didn't. They still haven't. And so the answer to that has got to be that he didn't read their determination, their patience, their willingness to lose and lose and lose, and suffer and suffer and suffer. But here, right after Tet, he was saying that we had inflicted these tremendous losses on them, and that they'd about shot their wad, and if he were Ho, he would negotiate now.

Well, he was asked about South Vietnamese troops. Before that, this may be an interesting point. I asked him if Westmoreland was satisfied and if he was satisfied, in view of all the advance

intelligence we had, that our troops at the time of Tet were in an adequate state of readiness when the Communists struck. "First, the President said simply, 'Yes.' He paused, as if to let it go at that, and then decided to amplify a little. He said he thought the figures proved that they were. 'When you kill ten thousand of their people and take about two thousand prisoners, even if some of those prisoners turn out to be civilians, and we lose only two hundred, that pretty well proves that we were on the alert. We couldn't stop them from doing some of the things they did, and there may have been a sergeant asleep somewhere, or one with a beer can in his hand and his zipper open, or a corporal sitting in a jeep with a woman on his lap--we don't know what happened to those two jeeps,' he said"--and I'm still not clear on that reference to two jeeps--"'but when you look at the figures,' he went on, 'and you look at what happened, our troops did a hell of a good job.'"

Then we asked him, somebody asked him, about the South Vietnamese troops. "He said he thought they did a damned good job, too, and as he had said in his press conference, 'They bore the real brunt of it around the country.' He said, 'Now, there are people like Teddy Kennedy and Birch Bayh who go over there and come back and say they are no good. But we have a general over there, a man who has spent a lot of time with those troops,'--and he paused--and he said, 'What's Westmoreland's deputy's name?' He

turned to Rostow and asked, 'What's Westmoreland's deputy's name?' And Rostow, sitting at the foot of the table, supplied the name of General [Creighton] Abrams. Johnson went on and said, "Abrams says that when they get adequate training, they are damned good soldiers and damned brave men.' And Johnson thought they did a good job, too." Rather interesting that right after Tet, at that particular moment, he couldn't think of Abrams' name, and of course he later named him to succeed Westmoreland.

F: Did you get the feeling he ever doubted his military leadership?

R: No. No. No, I didn't. Of course, it was mostly Westmoreland, and I think he had full confidence in Westmoreland right up to the end, and I think Westmoreland's coming home was not--he was not being relieved because of any failure.

F: Yes.

R: I think, by this time, Johnson had become convinced that Abrams was a hell of a tough soldier--especially good on search and destroy and that new blood might do him some good. He never, to me, so far as I know, never in any background discussion with anybody, expressed any doubt about the military leadership. Why don't I go back to this memo for one more thing anyway?

F: You got a lot in that session.

R: Oh, this was a long session. "At this point, the President said he wanted to go back and answer a question that I had asked him at his press conference, a question to which he was afraid he had given me

a pretty short answer, a question about the San Antonio formula. He asked me to repeat it, and I asked him, as I'd asked in the press conference, if there weren't differences between his statement of the San Antonio formula and Clifford's explanation of the formula before the Armed Services Committee. 'No, he didn't think so,' he said. 'Clifford just said something that should be obvious, that we would expect them'--that is, the enemy--'to go on supplying their troops during talks or a cease-fire, just as we would go on supplying our troops, but we wouldn't expect them to step up their supplies.'" This was, really, a big difference between what Johnson had described as the formula, which sounded like a cutoff of supplies. And Clifford came along--it was at his confirmation hearing--and said, of course, we would expect them to keep on supplying troops. "Johnson said, 'We may use different words when we state and restate that formula, but the important thing to remember is that they know what we mean.'"

Here he went totally off the record and talked about two unannounced bombing restrictions that he had put into effect. Then he spelled out what he means by the three key terms of the San Antonio formula: the talks must begin promptly; they must hold promise of being productive; and we assume that they will not take advantage of our bomb pause. "He said, on the word 'prompt,' that he and his advisors had spent hours agonizing over those words before he spoke them at San Antonio. 'When we say the talks should begin

promptly, we mean we would like to see them start the same day we stop bombing. We might wait a week.' He could stand to see Marines getting killed for a week, if it led to peace talks, although he didn't like to use those terms. But we were not going to stop bombing, and then just sit and wait for weeks for them to come to the table. 'Prompt means a week,' he said. 'The second word, productive, we've said we would enter into talks if we had reasonable hopes of them being productive. What we mean by this is that we want them to get down to business right away. We don't want another Panmunjom. They can put their four points on the table, and we can put our fourteen points on the table. They can say anything they want to. They can talk about how much beer I drink, or how much weight I've lost, but we want some assurance that they are going to talk about peace and not just talk. The first thing we would like to talk about is a cease-fire.'" That's interesting.

F: Yes.

R: "On the third key term, that they must not, quote, 'take advantage of our restraint. What we mean there,' he said, 'is simply that we don't expect them to use the talks and the bombing pause as a period during which they build up for another big offensive. If they're bringing down just enough material to keep their men there supplied, that's all right, but if we see them line up nine hundred trucks bumper to bumper, ready to run through like an express train on the first day we talk, then I'm going to send some B-52s to knock them out. In the San Antonio speech, I said we would assume they

would not take advantage, because we didn't want to make it sound like an ultimatum.' He said he had talked to Ike, former President Eisenhower, about talks, and Ike had advised him to be very wary of any promises the Communists make. 'You can't believe a goddamned thing they say,' Ike had told him.'"

"Then he was asked, how did he think his two latest crises, the Tet offensive and Pueblo, would cut politically. And he said he really didn't think he'd been hurt"--this was on February 2, 1968. "He really didn't think he'd been hurt. 'It's a funny thing,' he said, 'but in time of adversity, people look to their President, and they want him to be right.' He said he saw it in his mail, a lot of it from Republicans, and he saw it in his public appearances. When he came out of church the other day, people stepped back and applauded him. When he went to that state dinner for the Vice President, the Chief Justice, and the Speaker, the people there, people who were not particularly friends of his, applauded. That's the first time that had ever happened at all the state dinners he's ever been to. Lady Bird senses that people are for him now, want him to be right, and so do the girls. He said, 'You can tell when you're up or down a few points in the polls by the way people react to you.'"

So, that early after Tet, he had this sense of people rallying around him, and if you can believe what he was telling us then, didn't

think he had been hurt politically.

F: Did you have any adumbrations at that time that he was about to quit?

R: Oh, no. I didn't really. Right up till March 31, I was talking to people in the White House every day. The only person I talked to that ever suggested to me that there was any question at all about whether he might run was the head of USIA.

F: Leonard Marks?

R: Leonard Marks. I ran into him in this building. I think I said to him that the old Truman date of the end of March was coming up and the man was going to have to declare pretty soon, wasn't he, or words to that effect. And Leonard said, "Well, you know, the question occurs to me, has he waited this long because he has some doubt about whether he wants to run?" And there may be other people, now, who say they saw it coming. We know, of course, that there were a few people.

F: Did Johnson ever comment to you on either [Eugene] McCarthy or Bobby Kennedy's prospective candidacies, or on [the] New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Massachusetts primaries?

R: No, I remember one session on New Hampshire, where he pointed out that--it was kind of a defensive thing--he wasn't on the ballot and that McCarthy actually didn't win. He sort of took the press to fault.

F: Yes, he only got 42 per cent.

R: That's right. He sort of took the press to fault. They had done it

wrong again and said McCarthy had won in New Hampshire, where he didn't win, and furthermore, "I wasn't even on the ballot." But, I wasn't unaware of his contempt for Gene McCarthy and for Bobby. It would come out in these off the record, background talks. There would be a slighting reference now and again. But I never heard him say that he thought it would be a disaster if Gene McCarthy or Bobby wound up being the nominee. But we weren't thinking in those terms because we weren't thinking of Johnson--

F: No, as a noncandidate.

R: --as a noncandidate. One other thing, that maybe raised a question in my mind, is when he didn't file in Massachusetts. I thought that was strange, but then I had about made up my mind that he was simply not going to raise a finger. He was going to sit back and have his party draft him, let McCarthy and Bobby fight it out in the primaries. And he still, I'm convinced, would have been the nominee at Chicago.

F: Did you get the feeling that after March 31 and down to August of 1968, that he pretty well ran the convention in Chicago, as was sometimes charged, that he was back in Stonewall, or Hye, or wherever, pulling strings or did you think it was . . .?

R: No, no. I know it was a myth.

F: Yes.

R: I <u>know</u> it was a myth. I know, for example, that people in the

White House were asked to do chores in connection with the convention. Joe Califano is one. Johnson found out that he had been asked to do a position paper and he forbade him to do it. I know that people in the White House were told, "Keep your hands off the convention." I was in Austin the week of the convention, and it was exactly the reverse of 1964, when everything was cleared with the White House. In 1968 Johnson was sitting out at that ranch, and had no more to do with what went on at Chicago than we did sitting at the hotel room down in Austin watching it and thinking at times, you know, it might be better if somebody was in charge. No, he will be borne out on that, that he took hands off and Hubert was on his own.

F: Any indication that, in a sense, he hand-picked Hubert or was the logic overwhelming for Hubert?

R: No, I certainly think Humphrey would have been his choice, but he might have given Humphrey a lot more notice if he had both decided not to run and tried to dictate his successor.

F: I haven't talked to Humphrey, but I rather gather he was as caught off guard as you and I.

R: He was. There were many, many more things Johnson could have done. Humphrey was leaving for Mexico--I think it was a Sunday morning--and as I understand it, he told Hubert what he was going to do about the bombing, that he was going to cut back bombing, but didn't really tell him in so many words, "I'm not going to run."

F: Did Johnson ever admit doubts about his policy in Vietnam in your presence?

R: Only in the most tentative sort of way. Like he might say, "Maybe they're all wrong. Maybe [Robert W.] Komer is wrong when he says we can make it so painful for them that they're going to come to the peace table." But he'd keep saying, "But the best damn advice I can get is that this is going to work." So in a very limited way, he conceded that everybody might be wrong, but right up until, as we now know, until Clifford came in as secretary of defense--basically, he turned around within about a one month period after Clifford came in.

F: Yes. Did you get the feeling that he'd been too extravagant in his praise of people like McNamara and Westmoreland and Rusk? So that, in a sense, he had pinned himself into a position where he couldn't disagree with them? I'm following a personal interest in this case. I have a feeling that, regardless of how you feel about Clark Clifford, that the mere fact that you've got a new man in there gives you a fresh examination. Maybe the State Department would have been the same thing even if Rusk turned out to be the greatest secretary we ever had.

R: It gives you more room for maneuver. I think going from Westmoreland to Abrams gave him more room for maneuver. If Abrams had suggested, "Let's knock off search and destroy," the President could say, truthfully, "My new commander in the field says . . .and this is a

change of tactic that has been recommended to me by my experts." You do get more room for maneuver by changing the people in charge. But, I think he was loyal as hell to people like Rusk, McNamara, Westmoreland. Sometimes he may have had reason to doubt things like body counts. He's told us--this may get back to your other question--he has told me and other people I'm sure, that he would fire back a cable every now and then questioning body counts and claims of victory, and so on.

F: After the convention in 1968, did you get the feeling that he really preferred Nixon over Humphrey, to teach the party a lesson?

R: No, no, no, no. I think that's another myth.

F: It's one of the myths.

R: I think he didn't do a lot of campaigning for Humphrey because: A, Humphrey didn't ask him to and B, if Humphrey had asked him to, he might have said to Hubert, "I might do you more harm than good."

F: It had a certain kiss of death feeling.

R: Yes, he did campaign for him in Texas the last weekend before the election, put in a hell of a hard day. I followed him around the Astrodome, and he laid it on the line.

F: What was his mood like at that time?

R: I think he thought that Hubert might win.

F: It was a fight worth making.

R: Yes, he laid it on the line. It was not any faint praise or anything like that. Even after Humphrey's Salt Lake speech, I know he

still wanted him to win.

F: There's a lot of talk about the transition and the fact that Truman set a pattern. Did you see any real examples of an orderly transition of government, or did one day on January 20th at noon everybody moved out and somebody else came in?

R: No, I think it was orderly. I think it was very orderly. Johnson actually made more provision for consultation, provided more office space over here in the . . .

F: EOB?

R: No. In the Federal Office Building there on 17th Street. Johnson made more plans for transition, provided more people and did more thinking about it than Nixon ever took advantage of. But he did make available every Cabinet officer, every member of his staff, to talk to their opposite members as they were named. I think it was the smoothest of the transitions I've seen. I think the act providing all that money for transition is a damn good thing.

F: Did you get the feeling, or did you ever hear Johnson speak . . . He did more--I think this is on the record--for civil rights advancement than anybody within recent memory at least, and yet a lot of his difficulties came from the militant blacks and some not-so-militant blacks. Did he ever express his viewpoint to you on such people as [Ralph] Abernathy, or Martin Luther King, or the more extreme blacks? Did he ever feel that he sort of had been led down a false road? Was his commitment real?

R: Well, his commitment was real, but I think his disenchantment with the leadership was just as real. I never thought after 1957 that he was playing civil rights just for votes. He wound up being regarded as a turncoat in his own country, the South. But he never felt, really, a real rapport with Martin Luther King. When King turned anti-Vietnam, then he was more disenchanted with him. I was aware that he felt the irony of the fact that he had been a big and effective civil rights advocate and then was reviled and denounced by a lot of blacks. It's undeniable that he didn't have a good close rapport with the militant civil rights leaders.

F: Did you think he diminished in power then after March 31? Could you see evidence of that? In other words, should a president take himself out?

R: Well, I think the first effect of it was that his popularity shot up. I'm sure the polls show that. He gained in popularity after he declared himself politically dead, just as Kennedy had a big upsurge in popularity after he was dead. But popularity isn't power. From that March until January I'm not aware of any big battles he lost, or of anything he tried to do and failed because he had declared himself a lame duck.

F: Were you intimately connected with the final Udall-Johnson misunderstanding or was your position pretty much like mine, just what you read?

R: I do know from talking to people there that he was sore as hell

about a couple of things that Udall did in the midnight hours of the dying administration.

F: Have you seen Johnson since he went out of office?

R: Not to talk to, no.

F: Did you see him on the last day, January 20, 1969?

R: You mean the Inauguration?

F: Yes.

R: No, I didn't go up to the Hill.

F: You didn't go to any of the functions, farewells?

R: Farewells? No, I didn't?

F: So you have no idea how he surrendered the power?

R: Not from firsthand knowledge or observation. But I think that he did it gracefully. A lot of people will say that he demeaned the presidency by his lack of style. I always felt that one of the things he had uppermost in mind was the preservation of the dignity and power, or the power and dignity--which order I don't know--but the dignity of the presidency, and in my mind, he would have been utterly incapable of slighting Nixon or in any way indicating that he didn't like him on the final day of his presidency.

F: From your knowledge of several presidents, how would you compare, in general, Johnson's staff work with those of the other presidents? Was it better or worse?

R: Well, I think it was the best, really. Each staff gets bigger, and if they're well organized, they get better. I think after he was

elected in his own right and eventually set up a staff that was all Johnson people, using task forces as an adjunct to staff, the Califano legislative program operation was the best by far. I think it was a better organized staff than Kennedy's and better than Ike's.

F: Do you think the Great Society pushed forward more domestic legislation than the country was ready to absorb? Do you think a lot of the disaffection is due to a raising of new ideals and new hopes? In other words, is Johnson a victim of his own success domestically?

R: I think the answer is both, that he pushed forward more than the country was ready to swallow and that this raised expectations beyond the point where they could be satisfied in one, two, three or four years, and so he was a victim of both of those things. I think he was a victim most of all of Vietnam. That's probably unarguable. But I think his personality had a hell of a lot to do with his ultimate downfall.

F: Are you talking about his general abrasiveness or the fact that you ate an endless round of barbecue and watched him eat peas with his knife?

R: No, no. Credibility.

F: Or with his spoon?

R: I'm talking about credibility. One thing you've got consistently in the polls is--way down after they ask do you approve his

conduct of the war, what's your rating of him as president--the question that either Gallup or Harris asks: do you have personal trust, do you trust this man personally? He never, never got a very high rating there, and I think this is a real gut thing with voters. They've got to trust the guy.

F: Is this a hangover from his presumed wheeler-dealer days in Congress, or is this just the fact that there are too many instances where you can't trust him?

R: Perhaps he never lived down the wheeler-dealer image entirely, but as president he established, and then opened wide, a credibility gap. We reached a point where people couldn't believe everything that he or the White House said. The Dominican Republic, we didn't talk about that.

F: No.

R: He said that we sent--what was it?--ultimately twenty-three, twenty-five thousand troops in there, simply to save the lives of--whatever we had--fifteen hundred Americans there. He insisted the first day, the second day, for a week, that this was only a livesaving operation. We were not trying to interfere in their political affairs, he said, or anything else. He went into great hyperbole about how they shot and killed and chopped off the heads of fifteen hundred people. Now, in my judgment, if he had said--after we got up to about twenty thousand troops--to the American people, "This is a little more than a livesaving operation. We do not want to see another Castro

in the Caribbean. We are in there to prevent a Communist takeover," he not only would have been believed, but I think the country would have bought that policy.

But there were instances, time and again, when he couldn't tell it quite straight, that he had to put his own spin on it. When we started bombing North Vietnam, he wouldn't say for weeks and then months, that this was a change, a basic change in policy, that we were going to go into a ground war in Asia. If he had said that, if he had said that Vietnam was just about cut in half and was about to go down the drain, so let's face it, folks, we're going to go into the war in Asia, and it's going to cost us a hell of a lot of money, and it may mean a call-up of troops. If he had started Vietnam on that basis, he might not have had as much trouble with it later.

So I would rank--I said his personality, but let's just say credibility as his number two problem, right after Vietnam. On domestic issues he had, right to the end, very good support. Medicare . . .

F: Education.

R: . . . education, aid to the cities. A lot of people stood in awe of his record in domestic affairs but they were confused and sore about Vietnam. They didn't quite trust this man, or they were aware of the credibility problem and to me, that hurt big. It might even have been--this is pure conjecture--but his problem of

credibility might have hurt him even if there hadn't been a Vietnam, the way I read the polls.

F: If he could have gotten by without a serious international crisis, he still would have had problems selling himself domestically?

R: Yes, I think so, given all of the other things in the equation.

F: Do you think he undid the Democratic party? You've got to admit it was something of a shambles. Or was this coming? I mean was this like so many other things, a question of time catching up?

R: I suppose to some extent he did, because when the in party runs the White House quite often the national committee, the organization, becomes the White House staff. They neglect fund raising and a lot of other things. He raised a hell of a lot of money, but the organization kind of falls apart because they've got what it's all about, the White House.

F: Kind of a sense of, "The organization, who needs it!"

R: Yes. Johnson was a good fund raiser, but not a good organization man. He figured on running on his record, and he would go out and do it.

F: May I say that you have been beautifully full and candid, and I'm highly appreciative.

R: Well, I'm glad you came.

F: I suppose we could go on forever, but we've got to stop sometime. We started in daylight and ended in dark.

R: If I get a chance, if I run through these things and see something that I think ought to be in those damned oral archives, I'll let you know.

F: Well, I'll eventually send you a transcript of this and you can decide what you want to do with it and also look at it with a reporter's eye to what may not have been included that ought to be.

R: Okay.

F: What are you doing now? You said you were off the White House detail.

R: I'm a roving contributing editor, doing things like the Dirksen piece.

F: Whatever you want to do, in other words.

R: Went up and did a piece on the Teddy Kennedy-Chappaquidick story, interpretative, in-depth, investigative,usually signed pieces. It's a lot better than sitting over there every day from ten o'clock in the morning until six, or seven, or eight at night.

F: It always reminds me very much of a fireman's job, beautiful and exciting when the fire catches, you know, and you answer the calls, and the rest of the time . . .

[End of Tape 3 of 3 and Interview I]

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of Charles Roberts

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Charles Roberts of Washington, D.C. do hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted on January 14, 1970 in Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Charles Roberts
Donor

Nov. 22, 1978
Date

James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

December 11, 1978
Date