INTERVIEW I

DATE: February 21, 1985

INTERVIEWEE: JAMES A. ROBINSON

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: LBJ Library, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: Mr. Robinson, may we begin by my asking you what brought you to write this book on Lyndon Johnson?

R: I was an active scholar at that time, and also a consultant to a publishing house, and one of the items that I looked at every week was *Publishers Weekly*, to see what was published that week, and notices of future things that I, as a political scientist and director of a research institute, ought to anticipate.

G: Was this the Mershon--?

R: Mershon Center for Education in National Security at Ohio State University. And, sometime in the summer or early fall of 1967, I counted or read that there were, as I recall, nineteen books by or about Robert Kennedy that were to be published in the fall and spring, before the elections of 1968. And that called to my attention [that] I hadn't seen anything about Johnson--particularly pro-Johnson; obviously there were books that were critical, or books about policy issues, the war, whatever. So I contacted my publisher, which was Bobbs-Merrill. I was a consultant to the college division, not the trade. And the director, or vice president, of the college division said, "That ought to be a trade book, not done by the textbook part of the house. But I think I can help you place it

with the trade division of--if not at Bobbs-Merrill, another house." Their principal offices then--I guess [they] still are--in Indianapolis. So he went off to New York to see, on his next trip, what he could do. And his notes indicate one or more houses said that's an interesting idea, yes, there's a market for that that would make us a little money. But several in a row rejected it on what I call ideological grounds--"We don't like the President." There were some sharp notes of a personal, antagonistic nature toward Lyndon Johnson.

My motivations, I suppose, in addition to filling a gap, a *niche* that a young scholar could carve out for himself and, if he brought it off, would bring some preferment to him--I also believed in the merit of the argument, and thought that Johnson had just done a whale of a job, particularly in domestic matters. And when I started the--this was before the Tet offensive; this was before things really fell apart in Vietnam, when there was still some hope that he and others would be able to do something [to] salvage the administration and go on to a second term in his own right.

G: May I ask if you're a Democrat?

R: Yes, you can ask, and the answer is yes. (Laughter)

G: Were you active politically in any sense? I mean, other than in the [inaudible].

R: I had been--as a graduate student at Northwestern, I had played a very minor volunteer role on the research staff of Adlai Stevenson's pre-convention campaign in 1956. I took the train down and worked some with John Brademas, who was then director of research for the Stevenson campaign. I had been to a lot of Democratic and Republican national conventions; I had written some political speeches for Brademas or others who asked me

to help. But I hadn't been a precinct worker; I hadn't managed a campaign, or anything of that sort.

G: So, what happened next? Who took the book on?

R: When several houses turned it down, my friend and colleague said, "This is embarrassing for me to be trying to place you with another house. I need to put you in the hands of an agent." So he went to see Sterling Lord, a prominent--then and now--agent. I was told to call Lord, which I did. He said, "Yes, I will represent you. You continue to write." I'd been trying to produce a chapter a week. I would have to look at the file to see precisely when that was, but in early December--say, six weeks, eight weeks at the most, after all this began, early December, there is a note that Sterling Lord called and said, "I have a contract with Coward-McCann," a small house as he described it--and it was. They were also publishing a book about Bobby Kennedy that was in the works and was being advertised.

I was expected to finish the manuscript by the fifteenth of January, and on the night of the fourteenth, I think it was--we still had overnight trains from Columbus to New York; I got on the Pennsylvania or New York Central, and took the manuscript to New York. I had dinner the next night with the publisher and the editor and the agent, and handed over a briefcase with the manuscript. In two or three weeks they had galley proofs; those were corrected, some changes made. In fact, because I had met my deadline, they were able also to do page proofs; there were some changes made again. Those were returned and the arrangements were made for the printer to start printing on the morning of April 1. Then, on the night of March 31, the President withdrew. The

publisher got cold feet, stopped the presses. I thought for a while they might go ahead; we tried recasting the first and last chapters. It still didn't quite fit with--to their satisfaction. And, within two or three weeks, they cancelled the publication altogether.

G: I'm not an experienced writer or publisher, but it seems to me that you set some kind of speed record in this process. (Laughter) Is that [inaudible]?

R: Well, it wasn't a long manuscript. Chapters were twenty or twenty-five pages, double-spaced. What I did was--I would get up early in the morning and write, and go in and leave that for a typist to work on that night, and pick up what she had done the night before, and I would go home and revise that in the evening, take that back the next day. As you--I was director of the Mershon Center, and there is a memo in the files to the provost of the university in which I made very clear that I was not using university resources for this; I paid the typist out of my own funds, and reimbursed the Center for any Xeroxing expenses, and tried to do my work in the meantime. Yes, it was done rapidly, but, as I recall, it came easily; I was well enough acquainted with most of the issues, both domestic and foreign.

I sent copies to an awful lot of people, and I'm not sure those lists are in there. I'm not sure I copied them; maybe I should have done that. It must have been twenty-five, fifty people got copies, and some of them replied at length. One of my colleagues in the history department who was for Eugene McCarthy was my best critic. He wrote me twenty single-spaced pages of criticism. One colleague in political science read the first chapter and was so infuriated that he never wanted to talk to me again. Other people around the country would take notes and send it back. I didn't have--I don't think I had

any of those left; I must have destroyed those. In that sense, I had a lot of good critics to help with revising and making sure some things were accurate.

G: Were these critics primarily people in the academic establishment?

R: Yes, most of the people I knew were academicians, except for Brademas and Bob Wood, the secretary of HUD, but they were too busy to make many detailed comments.

G: We hear a lot about the alienation of Lyndon Johnson and the so-called intellectual establishment. Is this reflected in any way in the commentary that you received?

R: Yes. That's why the New York publishers, who are agents of the intelligentsia, the intellectuals, if not intellectuals themselves--they didn't like the policy, but, I think equally important, didn't like his personal style. He was, for them, crude; somebody refers to his "barbecue manner." I think that had a lot to do--I think they wouldn't have liked Johnson even if he had been successful in every one of his policy ventures.

G: One also hears that this was, to some extent, because he succeeded John Kennedy, and not someone else, for example. Do you agree with that?

R: I wouldn't be surprised if that's right.

G: Did anyone in the White House know that you were [inaudible]?

R: I avoided--I didn't really have any connections, frankly. I wrote--I knew a lot of--Ralph Huitt, over at HEW, was a political science friend of mine. Wood and Brademas I've mentioned. But I made no effort to get in touch with the White House and, indeed, would have studiously avoided using that as a resource.

There is a note that the publisher--perhaps the agent--talked to Ben Wattenberg about the time the book was published. I had forgotten this until I reviewed the file the

other day. Apparently Wattenberg wanted a little different orientation in the first chapter. That was the sort of thing I did not want to happen.

G: You didn't want an in-house sort of--

R: I thought that the merit of the book was the independence with which it was written, the polemical nature of it, and it would stand or fall on whatever I could do, and not be seen as an authorized [inaudible].

G: Between the time that you submitted your manuscript and the galleys and page proofs and so on, and the time when the publication was projected, two things happened. One was the Tet offensive. Did this have any impact or bearing on the way the book was going, or the publishers' attitude, your attitude?

R: I don't recall any change in my attitude. I do find notes that say, while it was in pages, that the nature of the situation had changed, and maybe some thought ought to be recasting the first part of it. This may be why Wattenberg was consulted, and that may have been what he was referring to. But--the Tet offensive was, what, early February?

G: The first of February.

R: We seem to have corrected galleys and pages--this couldn't have been long after that. So, in retrospect, I find it difficult to document that that changed the nature of the argument. I wouldn't be surprised if I engaged in a kind of suppression of the significance of that.

G: Would that be because--how did you perceive Tet at the time? What significance did you attach to it?

R: I simply don't remember.

G: Where were you when the President gave his March 31--?

R: I was at home in Columbus. I had come back from a trip to Puerto Rico with my wife and daughter, who was about six months old; she had been born at the time I was writing this book. We got back to Columbus on, I think, Saturday, and the phone was ringing and it was somebody from NBC, I think, who knew about the book and wanted to talk about it and asked me what I supposed the President was going to say the next night. Well, I don't know; you know, I've never talked to him. I've seen Lyndon Johnson when he was a senator and I was a congressional intern, but I've never met him [or ] shaken hands with him. I don't know; I'm not an authority on what he's thinking. I've just written an argument. And then I watched that speech, and I can remember getting toward the end, suddenly getting the feeling that there was a surprise coming. And there are some clippings there which show me--a press release put out by Ohio State University--show me grasping at straws, that maybe he'll change his mind, or be drafted, or--I'm sure it was just an effort to salvage the publication of the book. (Laughter)

G: What was the atmosphere on the campus at Ohio State during this time? We hear a lot about Berkeley, and Columbia, and so on.

R: We were a little later in experiencing some of the demonstrations. Sometime--about the time this book was being finished, I was doing research in Washington on another matter, and I was sitting in my room at the Cosmos Club, waiting for my students to call and tell me how they were coming with their work on the Hill, and the phone rang and it was the executive assistant to the president of Ohio State, who called to say that they had their first sit-in--in the medical school, it turned out it was; the dean of medicine had called the police; the students were arrested. The medical faculty wasn't up in arms; the faculty

elsewhere in the university was. The president was going to appoint a blue-ribbon commission, and would I serve on it? The idea was to draft some kind of code of student rights and responsibilities. Well, I went back, and the first meeting of that committee--and I proposed that the historian who had done a good job making suggestions about my manuscript, and who was a McCarthy fan, be elected chairman. He said he wasn't up to it; too busy, or whatever reason. He moved that I be chairman. And I used to say that the reason I was elected chairman was that the McCarthy people were more numerous than the Johnson supporters, and they wanted to get me out of the campaign and keep him free!

Then we had, that spring, the first takeover of the administration building, but that was by a black group--not, as far as I knew at the time, related to Vietnam. We got our rights-and-responsibilities document out by Labor Day, and then I was asked to try to implement as many of those as possible. So I became--suddenly, within a matter of months, I moved from [being] an obscure research professor of political science into the forefront of an issue that, as you say, had already occurred at Berkeley about three and a half years earlier. And then when the incumbent vice president and provost left to take a presidency at a university elsewhere, I was sort of the student leaders' candidate to be vice president for academic affairs and provost. I, in the summer of 1969, was appointed to that office by the president and the board of trustees. Then, it was in the next year that we really caught the full fury of demonstrations. We had the National Guard on our campus at the time of Kent State; we were trying to stay open. Governor [James] Rhodes of Ohio had put the National Guard on several campuses, and finally ran out of troops

and closed the universities for--I've forgotten exactly--a week or so. I caught that whirlwind, more after Johnson left the presidency and at the beginning of the Nixon years.

(Interruption)

G: You said you were the student candidate for this position. Were you perceived by them as sort of an LBJ man, do you suppose?

R: No, I don't think that had anything to do with it at all. I think I was seen as a moderate, a trimmer, a compromiser, between the traditional trustee conservative view that we just shouldn't be admitting students to these--to governance, we shouldn't be giving them all these due-process rights, and, on the other hand, some more liberal faculty who would have asked far more than the trustees and the president felt they could give. And I was the--the president didn't like our report; I made sure that he didn't see it until it had gone to the printer so that he couldn't ask for it--the university president--so he couldn't ask for it to be revised. I was, as Adlai Stevenson used to say about moderates, [that] they're in the middle of the road where all the accidents occur, and that was the position that I had staked out. So that--when I said I was a students' favorite, I mean I was the student leaders' favorite; the president of the student body, and a handful of others who got on the search committee for a vice president and provost. I don't mean there was any popular referendum; I wouldn't have been that visible among--in a campus of nearly fifty thousand students. But among formal student leaders--not the activists out on the fringes, but the formal student government organization.

G: How would you characterize the political climate at Ohio State, compared with some

other campuses?

R: The fact that Berkeley occurred in December 1964, and Ohio's first demonstration was in February 1968, indicates a lot about the difference in style and attitudes between the two campuses. There were other Big Ten campuses, Wisconsin and Michigan, that had their demonstrations before we did. Even to this day, I think Ohio State has tended to be a more conservative student body and institution than other Big Ten universities. What I believe ultimately happened there was that a significant number, but still a minority, of that large student body became so agitated about the war, and race, that they could get the media's attention; there were enough of them to hold demonstrations; it continued to escalate until they were occupying buildings and throwing bricks through windows, and so forth. They were a minority, that's true. But they were a very agitated and intense minority. And the American political system has always tried to find a way to reconcile, or balance, majority interests with intense minority interests. A majority is reluctant to override an intense minority. When the intensity gets to the point of violence, then that balance breaks down, and other kinds of processes--force, counterforce, the law--have to be invoked to restore the balance.

G: What was the subsequent history of the book? You said that there were some attempts to revise the first and last chapters, and so forth.

R: There was that. And one of my students, a friend of an editor at *Playboy*--he urged me to give him a chapter--sort of an article that summarized it to send off. You see a response there. It was rejected. The style wasn't right, but also there was a hint of political reasons, too. Then at least a couple of publishing houses looked at it, showed an interest

in it--more than that, three or four; at least four, I could document. But they would have required considerable rewriting; the President was out of the listings. I think they were waiting--they knew there would be a spate of memoirs, and other people in a better position to tell interesting things about the administration than--this book was an argument for his reelection. It was not an insider's account; it was a systematic argument, and it was a clever piece of--and, I think, an original kind of campaign polemic. Not a biography, not--that was another reason I was disappointed that it didn't get published. I thought it was an unusual kind of campaign document. But that didn't make it an authoritative--a first approximation of the Johnson presidency.

G: So you've had it now for eighteen years, more or less.

R: It has always been my intention to deposit it here, but I had never been to Austin before, and since I came here for another purpose, now is the time to do it.

G: Let me ask you this. When Lyndon Johnson removed himself from the race, were there doubts in your mind as to how serious he was, how final that decision might be?

R: I'm not sure I remember.

G: Let me put it another way. Did you work for any candidate in 1968? Did you do any--?

R: Yes, I was for Humphrey thereafter. I didn't go to the convention; I knew it was going to be a bloody one, and I didn't want to get involved in that. I signed a petition to--for Humphrey in the fall. I liked him very much, and had met him, off and on, before. And later, when I was president of Macalester College in St. Paul, I saw more of him, because when he left the vice presidency he was a professor at Macalester. Then he went back to the Senate, but he would always--he would come by the college, once or twice a year,

when he would come home. I liked him very much. But, no, I didn't get involved in the 1968 campaign.

G: Did Humphrey talk to you about his experiences?

R: No, he never did.

G: He never talked about the 1968 campaign?

R: No.

G: Did you know Bill Connell, one of his aides?

R: I met him. That's all. [Inaudible]

G: I'm not sure that you have mentioned this. Would you stick by the judgments that you made in this book? What would you do differently if you were writing the book today--assuming your purpose is the same?

R: I think the--I haven't reread the chapter on Vietnam recently, but I'm sure that I glossed that one over. I'm sure that that's going to be the hardest thing for historians to deal with. For one thing, I'm just sure that the documentation must be massive. While I know very little about the [General William C.] Westmoreland trial, I got the impression, from what I read about that, the issue was a highly refined, almost point-of-the-needle kind of argument, and that--the issue had to do with footnotes, not the broad strategic picture. And I'm just afraid that if I tried to reassess that part of the period, I not only wouldn't be competent, but I'd be overwhelmed with the information overload. I just--I think it will be a long while before scholars get perspective on that, as it was with the Civil War.

One of the ideas I had when I was director of the Mershon Center was that we would take as a major project, involving historians, sociologists, psychologists, political

scientists, [and] economists, the impact of the Vietnam War on American society, and just commit ourselves for fifteen to twenty years. I don't recall that it was clear in 1967-1968 that the Johnson way, if I can call it that, of financing the Vietnam War would have the inflationary consequences that it had in the seventies and eighties. There must have been somebody who was warning the society, or the President, of that, but I don't recall that then as a--it didn't come to my attention; if it did, I suppressed that--(Laughter)--didn't remember that.

G: Well, there was a tax surcharge [proposal] in September of 1967.

R: Yes, maybe we thought that was going to limit the effect. But, Lord knows, that had just a continuing series of bad consequences for this society. It made it more difficult to realize the other objectives of the Johnson period, undermined the Great Society, hurt institutions like universities that heavily depended on endowments. It drove up the personnel costs of institutions, and we're heavily dependent on--75, 80 per cent of most college and universities' expenditures are for personnel. So, the consequences of Vietnam are not just a matter of did we turn tail and run, and therefore lose, and was the pride of the country adversely affected, or were we weakened internationally. The domestic consequences of that war would have to be assessed, and people speculate about that, obviously.

So I would think that my views would be tempered and revised. But, on the other hand, I suppose I would have thought that then. This was a first approximation of an assessment, in a partisan way, in a partisan election--there wasn't any doubt; I was up front about that. This wasn't a scientific account. On the other hand, it was a different

kind of partisan argument; it was based on a comprehensive set of ideas on how do you assess a president in midstream. That was what was clever, or different, about the nature of the argument.

G: I'm intrigued by the fact that you said that a McCarthy-admirer historian was your best critic. What was the nature of the criticism that he gave you?

R: I did not bring that, but maybe I can--there's no reason why I shouldn't send you that. I just didn't think it would be of interest to you. I didn't reread it, but I remember noting at the top of the first paragraph of his--I went through and took it out of the file--he said, "I'm a copy-editor at heart." And whether that--where the "whiches" were wrongly used, or where he differed about an interpretation, or I got a comma in the wrong place, a fact wrong that he could correct--he was very sympathetic to Johnson's domestic initiatives; it was the war that really bothered him and caused him to go over to McCarthy.

I think what's most important about that example is not that here was a McCarthy supporter helping a Johnson polemicist; it's a wonderful example of the collegiality in a university faculty. And we weren't intimate friends; I gave it to him because I knew he was a kind of cranky, careful scholar, and I thought, "If he'll read this, I'll benefit." And he did.

G: Where scholarship is at stake, people put their differences aside. That's interesting.

You followed the campaign, I suppose, pretty closely. Did you ever think that Humphrey might have a chance, a real chance? I presume you did; after all, you supported him, and you voted for him.

R: Well, hope springs eternal in a partisan's breast. I kept thinking that the McCarthy people

would come around. I thought they would be more rational about that than they were. I think I can recall feeling that Humphrey felt boxed in by the President on that. Whether that was true or not, people seemed to interpret it that way. I thought maybe after his Salt Lake City speech that Humphrey might yet--and it was very close. When you think of how divided the Democrats were, how Humphrey was, in a way, a consolation candidate--I don't believe Humphrey could have defeated Kennedy. I think Kennedy would have either got the nomination or left the party in August. Humphrey was--if Johnson was the consolation prize, Humphrey was the consolation candidate twice removed! And yet he almost defeated Nixon.

And Nixon had prepared for that campaign. Compared to Mondale's systematic efforts to get the nomination by doing all the things you're supposed to do with interest groups and party dinners and so forth, Nixon had campaigned for candidates, had gone to chicken dinners, as often. The nature of campaigning has changed. But Nixon had earned that nomination in 1968; he had prepared for it. And still Humphrey, with all his liabilities, almost brought it off. So I guess, yes, I was still hoping that he might pull it out.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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