

INTERVIEW I

DATE: February 21, 1974
INTERVIEWEE: NELSON ROCKEFELLER
INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ
PLACE: Dallas, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

F: This is an interview with former Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York in the Sheraton Dallas Hotel in Dallas, Texas, on February 21, 1974. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

To start, let's just talk about when you first became aware of Lyndon Johnson.

R: Down at the King Ranch, when I was visiting Bob Kleberg and his brother Dick Kleberg, and Lyndon Johnson was A. A. for Dick Kleberg.

F: I didn't know you were old enough for that.

R: How's that? Does that go back far enough for you?

F: That goes back far enough. You've weathered well. That wasn't the time when Jim Farley was there too?

R: No, sir. I used to go down every year in the fall to go shooting, hunting with my two brothers and our wives. I can remember old Mr. Dick now, flipping a silver dollar up, pulling a gun out and shooting it. [It was] very impressive.

F: Was Johnson someone that you were aware of, or was he just an A.A. back in the background?

R: Well, when you say I was aware of him, why, that's just exactly what

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 2

it was. I hadn't met him, I was just aware of him. Because, you know, I knew of him through Dick, and then Bob, too.

F: Did you have any idea at all and the opportunity to observe the relationship between the Congressman and Johnson?

R: No. I never saw him while he was with him, never saw him. Then I got to know Lyndon Johnson when he was a congressman, during the days when I was coordinator of Inter-American Affairs. He was very sympathetic and interested in the Western Hemisphere.

F: Well now, he was relatively a junior congressman, although he was coming up fast. Did you have much contact with him, or, again, was he somebody off in the shadows?

R: Not really much contact, except anybody who was friendly with the Western Hemisphere I was very enthusiastic about.

F: Did you have enough contact to get the feeling that he understood what Western Hemisphere problems were? Was he simpatico with Latin America?

R: He was supportive, and therefore I had to assume that he was aware. I knew Mr. Sam a lot better, I became very close to him. Of course, Lyndon was very fond of Mr. Sam, and was one of his strong allies in the House and later became his partner in running the Congress.

F: Well, you served three presidents in a row in there, regardless of party, and Johnson of course had a star that was rising all the time. When you stayed over and assisted Mr. Truman's Administration did you have any further contact with Mr. Johnson?

R: I was still in Inter-American Affairs until I got fired by Mr. Truman.

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 3

When Ed Stettinius went out and then Jimmy Byrnes came in he wanted to get a new group in, you know, which is right.

F: Yes, the fortunes of war.

R: And I stayed on. I guess I was the last one of the previous ones to stay on. During that period it was rather hectic, so I didn't really have much contact. Then I came back for a job for Mr. Truman, which was to head up an advisory committee on international development. That work was done primarily outside of the Congress, outside of Washington.

F: So during that time--

R: During that period I didn't have much contact. It wasn't until the Eisenhower Administration that I really came back into that picture, and then of course he was Leader of the Senate and a very powerful, wonderful figure. No man could have done more to have supported the President, and particularly when you figure he was of an opposite party. He and Mr. Sam, in my opinion, made the foreign policy possible of President Eisenhower.

F: Now under President Eisenhower did you have much opportunity to work with the Congress?

R: I did in connection with the President's Advisory Committee on--no, pardon me, I've got the wrong commission. I did in connection with the Committee on Government Organization. I was chairman of that, and in that committee I worked with the Congress on ten reorganization plans which we had worked out. We worked out, as a matter of fact, thirteen; we sent ten of them up, and they were passed.

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 4

F: Did Mr. Eisenhower express himself as to the effectiveness of the Rayburn-Johnson team?

R: Oh, yes. He was devoted to both of them, deeply grateful to them. And his secretary, President Eisenhower's secretary Ann Whitman, who now works for me, her respect was tremendous for them.

F: Did Johnson ever come to you for advice?

R: No, sir.

F: Did you go to him?

R: Well, I worked on issues as they came up. I later was Under Secretary of HEW, and then special assistant to the President, and I didn't have. . . . I was working particularly with the government reorganization committees of both Houses, you see. I didn't really have an intimate contact, but it was a very friendly relationship. Mr. Sam I got to know better. Then he was raising money for his library, and he got to a point--well, he wasn't raising it, his friends were, and they got to a point where they got stuck. I remember Bob Anderson came to me, he was Under Secretary of the Treasury, and said they needed \$200,000 to get across the top. They didn't want to ask for money from people that could be criticized, you know, because of political connections and so forth, and did I think that my brothers and I could do anything. Well, I was very, very fond [of and a] tremendous admirer of Mr. Sam's and of Lyndon Johnson, so I talked to my brothers and we gave them the \$200,000. Well, he was a very loyal man. You know what I mean?

F: Yes.

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 5

- R: So he did something for my brother. Well, it was really for President Eisenhower, but--
- F: We're talking about Mr. Sam now?
- R: Mr. Sam, that's right. Which was typical of both of them, because they both had the same quality.
- F: Yes.
- R: My brother was appointed chairman of a committee on--what do they call them--environment or ecology, created by President Eisenhower. No, I guess it was created by the Congress on the President's recommendation. Laurance was made chairman of it. The appropriation went up to the Hill and was knocked out by the Appropriations Committee in the House, and my brother came to me and said, "What do you do?" He said, "I've become chairman of a commission, and the Congress didn't appropriate the money." I said, "I don't know, but there's one man that would know what to do and that's Mr. Sam. I'll call him and tell him what your problem is, and he'll advise you." So I called him and told him, and he said, "Leave it to me." And this was typical of them. This was something the President had proposed; he believed in it, he'd passed the legislation. [With] the Appropriations Committee, you know, you get in a big deal with a few hundred thousand or something.
- F: They only cut the small appropriations.
- R: That's right. And, you know, at that time ecology wasn't so big.
- F: No.
- R: So he came down; he left the Speaker's rostrum, whatever official

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 6

act you have to do to turn it over to somebody else, asked for the privilege of the floor, went on the floor, asked to make an amendment to the appropriations bill which was before the House--I don't know if this had ever been done before--and he put back the two or three hundred thousand, whatever it was, into the appropriation. Well, that's got to have been a wonderful thing. My good friend Jim Cannon sitting over here understands the Congress probably better than anybody, and that's got to be an extraordinarily wonderful gesture for someone to do.

F: Yes.

R: And I'll never forget, I came down [to Texas]. It was, I don't know, '64 or some year I was campaigning. I guess it was '64 for the presidency, the nomination. I was somewhere down here in Texas visiting, and he drove sixty miles just to pay his respects to a friend of the opposite party. But this is what I associate with these two men in the way of friendship and loyalty to their friends.

F: I really rather gather that in your relationship, party really never existed, except when you had to get down to it.

R: I started under Roosevelt for five years and worked on the Hill, of course, as head of an independent agency, then Assistant Secretary of State, representing a Democratic President with a Democratic Congress, and I got to know the leadership in both Houses. So I and the few that are left from those days are still all friends, and I've kept those friendships and made new ones. But the first time that I really sat down quietly, without a government problem to

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 7

discuss, with Lyndon Johnson was at a governors conference in Miami. It must have been about '63. Yes, '63, I guess, and he was down there speaking to the governors conference. I went up to the hotel room in the afternoon to call on him. He was my friend.

F: Yes.

R: Well, I've got to say to you, that was a mighty discouraged man. I know people reasonably well, and I knew him pretty well and I really felt for him.

F: This was during his vice presidential period.

R: Yes. He was making a speech, and when I listened to that speech I knew why he felt as badly as he did when I talked to him in the afternoon. That no more reflected his thinking than the man in the moon. He was given a speech which he had to give because it was the Administration position. See, I had told President Nixon in 1960, when he was very generously asking me to go on with him as vice president, that I wasn't made to be stand-by equipment. I'd known Henry Wallace very well, and I know what he went through. And I knew Harry Truman when he was vice president. I've really known all the vice presidents, and they've all taken a terrible beating, let's face it. The smartest thing I ever did was not to get involved.

F: It's kind of like, oh, buying a Cadillac to haul hay or something.

R: That's right. But it's literally stand-by equipment: you're waiting for the main generator to go out.

F: Yes.

R: Well, okay. But that wasn't for me, and it wasn't really for Lyndon

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 8

Johnson either in terms of his temperament and his personality. He'd been, you know, a powerful Leader. Anyhow, he made this speech, and then of course he became President. I'd like to say, and I'm delighted at this opportunity to say it for the record, no President that I have known showed greater awareness, sensitivity to, or respect for the role of governors than he did. Whenever there was a major problem he'd call us down and consult with us about it, tell us what his plans were. He worked with the governors. He was aware of the governors. So I've got to hand it to him. But that was a period of the closest-- I was governor through four or five presidents, four presidents.

F: Right.

R: Eisenhower, Kennedy Four presidents.

F: Johnson and Nixon.

R: And he was tremendous.

F: I've heard John Connally say in Texas that at the governors conferences, you were always the best prepared governor there. Part of which he attributed to you, part of which he attributed to your research staff, but which comes back to you. Did you have any particular opportunity to observe John Connally as he did you?

R: I did. Before I talk about John, I've got to make a comment about government. And that is, I always viewed politics as a means to an end, not an end in itself. My interest was government. I grew up in government, or at least a great deal of my life experience has been in either business administration or government administration.

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 9

My interest was in government. I learned about politics, and I like people so that wasn't too difficult. But my interest was really government, not politics. So I saw that as a backdrop. So that when I got into government, I'd been in government, in administrative positions, and so I was interested in the problems of government, and interested in the problems on an analytical basis without politics. After we'd done the analysis, put the politics in afterwards. But I didn't want to get the politics in the analysis, because then you don't get an honest analysis.

Now I don't think there's a brighter guy than John Connally, very able, very bright. I think that his interest is heavier in politics than mine was.

F: Yes.

R: I don't say he wasn't interested in government, because he was.

F: Yes.

R: But if you get what I'm thinking here, see. My interest in those conferences was with substantive problems. His interest in those conferences was more in the politics of the relationships of government than they were on the substantive problems. Now maybe we had different substantive problems. That would be the only difference, I'd say. There's no brighter guy around.

F: I was an undergraduate with John Connally. And our feeling was, when he became governor, that his big interest had been to maneuver to get to be governor, and that he never considered that he had to be governor when he got there.

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 10

R: Well, you said it. I didn't.

F: Right.

R: But I think we understand each other.

F: Right.

R: So that I was always fooling with these. And a lot of these governors thought, you know But I thought, "What's the point of coming to a governors conference if we don't discuss common problems?" I was going to talk politics. I like politics. But the real thing I was interested in was, "How do you solve these problems?" and "What is your experience in that?" and "What's the other guys?" Most of them don't last as long as I did, or they don't stay there as long; therefore, they don't get as immersed in the problems.

F: How long did it take Johnson to get in touch with you after Kennedy was shot? I know you were down in Washington by the 25th. Kennedy was shot here on the 22nd.

R: That I could not tell you. This I cannot tell you. I know where I was when I got the news he was shot. I was with Tom Dewey at lunch. But when we got together and when he called, this the record would show, and I don't know.

F: I have a record that you were down in EOB by the 25th, and then I don't show any further association with Johnson until February 10, when you were in the Oval Office. Now then, did Johnson call on you regularly for advice before he moved out on domestic programs?

R: Well, he did with the governors as a group. I was the senior

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 11

governor, and he was the one President who recognized seniority. He got that understanding from the Congress. He was always very generous, and my work with him and with the governors conference was not on a partisan basis, but was on a bipartisan basis. I know that on various occasions I would propose resolutions of support for his policies, because I believed in them. I thought he was a great statesman and a great American patriot.

F: You had something that Lyndon Johnson had background on, knew about, and that was the water emergency problem in '65.

R: Yes.

F: What is your memory of that, insofar as Johnson's concerned?

R: Let's see, which was the '65 emergency?

F: You came down to the White House to have lunch and to talk about the problems, and you sort of had an interstate arrangement of New England..Middle State governors. This was Joe Califano's first big job.

C: That was the drought, I think, wasn't it?

R: Was that the drought?

F: Yes, that's the drought?

R: Wasn't it New Jersey?

F: Right.

R: The Delaware, the water from the Delaware River Basin.

F: Right.

R: Yes. I think that's what it was. We had worked out our problems with New Jersey and Delaware and Pennsylvania. The real truth of the

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 12

matter was, we had pretty much worked out our own agreement between us. The federal government, being responsible, came into the picture and called us down, and they were working towards the same objectives and were very cooperative. I think that had we not done it ourselves, what they did in initiative would have been very good.

F: The White House acted as back-up in this case?

R: Well, they took the initiative, and it just happens that we already had worked it out. But had we not already worked it out, what they did would have been a savior, see. But the way, now that you mention it, I remember it, we were working the thing out among us. But they were very cooperative, and he was cooperative on everything. I went to see him on this drug thing. That wasn't as big nationally then as it is now, but I'd been to see Kennedy, I went to see him, and I went to see Nixon.

F: Did he seem to have a grasp of most of these problems you took to him?

R: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. He was a tremendous guy. I was very fond of him personally, and my wife was very fond of him. I was very fond of he and his wife, both of us of both of them. You may know that Happy and I were going down to spend the night with them the day after he died. We had a date, and we were going down to the Ranch. We'd been down there. We went over to see him when the governors conference was down here.

F: Yes.

R: Not here, but in Houston.

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 13

F: Houston.

R: We flew over and spent the night with them. We'd been there another time. So we were going down. I was going to ask him to be co-chairman with me of this Commission on Critical Choices that I'm down here to talk about tonight. And then the tragedy was . . . But he told Happy when we saw them the last time--we drove out in a golf cart to get on the plane, and I drove out with Mrs. Johnson--"Happy, I'll never see you again." She didn't know what he meant, but it certainly worked out that way. He was a very good friend of ours.

F: When you went to the Ranch, did you get each time the traditional Johnson treatment, a tour of the Ranch?

R: Yes. And my wife took a ride, and she told him not to drive so fast, or not to drink so much. Now, she was pretty frank.

F: I always thought in that case, that that was one man I wouldn't buy a used car from.

R: She was very fond of him, and they had a very close relationship. They were very frank with each other. She was successful in getting him to slow down, which I don't think most people were.

F: No.

C: Wasn't that the time you flew the meat down to the Ranch for him from Houston?

R: It could well have been.

C: I remember the steaks on the plane.

R: That was coming from Houston. We came down once from New York. But there was one other time I was going to mention . . . Oh, he asked

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 14

us--we never really knew why, and we were flattered-- to spend a weekend, his last weekend with him while he was in office at Camp David, and with his family, which was a very thoughtful thing for him to have done.

F: That's the greatest compliment he could pay you.

R: Oh, yes. Well, he knew I was very fond of him.

F: Yes.

R: I really felt badly for him, because I knew what he'd been through. I spoke for him, for instance, up at a Grange meeting in Syracuse, when he just couldn't go because of the student problems.

F: Yes.

R: They had that chorus from West Point there lining both sides of the street, but he didn't go. So I know what he'd been through, and I understood what he was trying to do and the problems that he had in the Vietnam situation. So I felt badly for this man, I really did, because he was a tremendous patriot. So we went and spent that weekend with them, and it was a lovely weekend, which was his last weekend in the White House.

F: What did you do, just sit around and talk?

R: Yes. Then Clark Clifford came over, and we watched the game. That was when Joe Namath That was that famous game when he--

C: The Super Bowl.

F: Super Bowl.

R: Yes, we watched that game. We had a wonderful time, bowled a couple of times, sat around and talked, had a good time. Happy conjectured

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 15

as to whether everything said in the room was being recorded. She was fabulous. But we had the happiest relationships, happiest memories, and continue to have with Mrs. Johnson. And typical of their thoughtfulness was her invitation to have the Commission come down and have its meeting. I was going to ask her to be co-chairman. You know, we are making a record here, and these are some of the intimate things. We had another weekend set to go down to spend the night down here. On the way down I stopped for a day in Washington, and my brother Winnie died--

F: Yes. I knew him.

R: --so that had to be cancelled.

F: I used to see him in Little Rock, or Winrock.

R: Great guy. Great guy.

F: And I know Laurance somewhat. Mrs. Johnson, I think, thinks Laurance probably discovered America.

R: Well, he thinks she discovered beauty and ecology, and they have worked together on art and still are.

F: Yes. I don't want to take your short time now to get into any specifics, but it might be worth exploring. You remember of course the blackout in New York.

R: Yes, sir.

F: Did the President call you?

R: Well, let's see. I was in the car driving in from the airport from Washington.

F: Is this in Albany or New York?

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 16

R: I was in New York, coming in from Washington. I work in the car always; there is a light in the back seat. It was in the evening, and all of a sudden I realized it was dark outside--you know, no lights. I looked up and there were no lights, no traffic lights. That's what made me realize it. Because we were having trouble, you get horns blowing and so forth. I got to the apartment and had to walk up fifteen floors. I was having a meeting with the head of State University, who walked up, too. I don't think the President called that night. I had so many problems that I couldn't remember, but if the record says he did, he did.

F: Well, is this something where you--

R: It was typical of him.

F: Was this something where you could use the aid of the federal government, or was this pretty much your own problem?

R: It was a local operation. We're a pretty self-reliant state, you know.

F: Yes, I know.

R: I don't remember many times in fifteen years trying to get Washington to pull us out except on money, which was a longer term problem than a crisis.

F: Right. Did the President ever talk with you about the campaign of '64?

R: Oh, yes. '64?

F: Sixty-four. That's against Goldwater in which you had some interest, if you will recall.

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 17

R: Wait a minute. What was the year he left office?

F: He left in '69. It was after the '68 campaign.

R: He was very friendly about '68, and very supportive of me for '68.

F: Yes.

R: Oh '64, when he appointed Goldwater as head of the United Nations--
no, as ambassador.

F: Goldberg.

R: Goldberg, excuse me. Goldberg as ambassador. I was thinking of
Goldberg. Well, let me tell you this story, too. When he appointed
him as ambassador I thought to myself, "That's building this guy up
to run for governor some day." Now this was in the back of my mind.
However, when Henry Morgenthau's son--what's his name?

C: Robert.

F: Bob Morgenthau.

R: Bob Morgenthau was running. Lyndon was in town and was supposed to
speak for him, and he didn't appear, something conflicted. I saw
him later, and he said, "Look, I'll never campaign against you.
You've been a long-time friend." And he never lifted a finger. He's
a fabulous guy. I mean, these personal loyalties were.

On the Goldwater thing, '64, I don't remember talking to him
about it, to tell you the honest truth.

F: It may be the kind of year you like to forget.

R: Well, it was a disaster.

F: Yes.

R: I had to go pro forma, but I can tell you, though, something about

ROCKEFELLER -- I -- 18

that: he [Goldwater] used my speeches from New Hampshire and my material, a lot of it verbatim.

F: Without credit. (laughter)

R: Well, it was all right. But I'd said it all, see, and I was quoting Goldwater himself. But he used a lot of that stuff. I'd done a good research job and really decimated this guy with his own writing, the inconsistencies, although he was an awful nice guy, and still is.

F: Thank you, Governor Rockefeller.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of Nelson Rockefeller

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, Nelson Rockefeller of New York City 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 February 21, 1974 in Dallas, Texas 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.


Donor

August 8, 1977
Date


Archivist of the United States

August 24, 1977
Date