INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 6, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: RICHARD H. ROVERE

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

PLACE: Mr. Rovere's office at the New Yorker, West 43rd Street, New York City

Tape 1 of 1

M: Let's begin simply by identifying you. You're Richard Rovere, and you've been associated with the New Yorker since, what, 1944 or thereabouts?

R: That's right.

M: And you are well-known as an author of numerous contemporary historical type works, Senator Joe McCarthy and The General and the President, a fairly well-known list. You said you wanted to get rid of the personal instances. How much personal acquaintance did you have with President Johnson at any time?

R: I think rather little, though it's sometimes hard to recall that sort of thing. A few years ago I was going through some correspondence and found that I'd had and completely forgotten a certain amount of correspondence with him in the fifties sometime. I think that the moment before I came on it I would have sworn that I never had a letter from Lyndon Johnson in my life, and there it was. I knew very well George Reedy, and a large part of my time in Washington, until he left the White House, I'd seen a great deal of George and was very fond of him. He was very useful to me because George was,

all the time I knew him, a spokesman for Johnson.

I think the first meeting, and perhaps the only one when he was in the Senate, that I had was around 1957, I guess, on that civil rights bill. I talked to him a bit about that. I think that's what the correspondence was about, too, although I forget. I never saw him in the vice presidency. As president I traveled with him a few times, and the most memorable encounter was spending five or six hours upstairs in the White House during the 1964 campaign when he just got four or five of us in. It was an evening of Johnson monologue. It was just fascinating. Then I covered him for a while in the 1964 campaign and in the second term I think, so only on fairly public occasions, press conferences. Very few press conferences, as a matter of fact, because, not being based in Washington, his style was all wrong for me. I couldn't make a press conference on a half hour's notice and so I went to very few of those. On that evening in 1964 I've done a long memo, which is with my papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society.

M: Oh, good.

R: I think it's a fairly interesting document. He just went into everything. He ran down the list of everybody who got him.

M: Right.

R: His tendency was to run them down, but what I meant was he ran down the whole Cabinet and congressional leadership and God knows what else. But as I say, it's one of the most fascinating evenings in my life, but I've made a record of it that exists.

M: There's no reason to repeat it. Does that kind of thing make a pretty good impression? Is that a good technique in dealing with press people or not, in your opinion?

R: I don't know. It certainly gave one a picture of Johnson that one needed to understand him, or begin to understand him. Johnson seemed to me kind of unique in that way. Generally with politicians the public and the private, you know, what you'd see on television and what you'd see face to face is more or less the same. I mean, Kennedy, Eisenhower and the rest that I've known were what you expected them to be. But I think you had to spend a certain amount of time with Johnson to know that he was a very funny man; he was a great mimic. I guess everybody's written this now, but it came as a kind of revelation. Also, there was a kind of monstrous side to him that couldn't be revealed to the public, I mean a malice that had the public been exposed to it they would have said, "God, we can't have a man like this around."

So the question was, "Was it effective?" It was effective in educating me and somewhat making me feel more confident about him, because along with everybody else there was that very sharp intelligence and knowledge on display. I mean he showed an immense knowledge of everything he talked about. I wouldn't say that it helped to get him a better press. I don't know whether it did or whether it was kind of a plus for him or not. I'd simply say that, from my point of view and from that of a lot of others, it was very revealing.

M: He's pretty well-known or has a reputation at least for calling reporters and columnists and so forth up when they were critical of him, letting them know that he's been reading their articles and didn't like it. Did he ever do that with you?

R: No, never had it happen. I had it happen with Kennedy. I doubt very much if Johnson or anyone was monitoring the New Yorker for him. Kennedy read it himself. The New Yorker, fond as I am of it, is not taken very seriously as a political magazine, and I don't think he'd much care. No, I never had that. I had a little argument once with George Christian about something that grew to be quite serious, but I doubt if it ever did reach the President.

M: What about the troubles that Mr. Johnson had with the press? He had as I recall fairly good relations with the press when he was in the Senate, or at least a good image in the Senate. It went downhill fairly rapidly. Do you think this was the fault of some specific thing that could be isolated or sequence of events?

R: I don't know that he had such good relationships in the Senate. That would have to be established from the record. He had a very eloquent spokesman in George Reedy in those days I think, and George used to move around town an awful lot and always as the spokesman for Johnson. Some of us who were very fond of George and respected him greatly began after a while to feel that where Johnson's interests were concerned we couldn't expect much from George but the Johnson side, so you made the proper discounts. But I don't know, is it a fact that he had fairly good press when he was [in the Senate]?

M: Well, just my impression was that he was looked upon as the great man who could move the Senate and so on.

R: Oh, yes. Yes.

M: His public image was never detracted from by the news media.

R: Oh, there's no doubt that everyone felt that he was a marvelous congressional politician and greatly skilled, but whether it went beyond that, whether he was much admired as a figure, I don't know. He tried awfully hard, that is, to win the press, but I don't recall any great enthusiasm over Johnson as a Senate leader, although my memory tends to be short and inaccurate and I could be wrong. I think he had a good press, certainly, for months if not years after his becoming president, and he deserved it.

M: His press began to get bad, I think, maybe after Reedy left. Do you think that had anything to do with it, that he never really replaced Reedy satisfactorily?

R: Let's see. What was the succession, Reedy to Moyers?

M: To Moyers, to Christian.

R: And that was in the summer of 1965.

M: Sixty-five, yes. Of course, that coincided with the escalation in Vietnam.

R: Yes. And it coincides with another thing, a series of things. That I do remember and I did write about; that he was then getting a terrible press and not just because of Vietnam, perhaps not at all because of Vietnam, but because as my memory has it, there were several other things. There's a story that I recall that--I'm sure

it's true though I never got into it firsthand--sometime in the summer of 1965 he got so angry at the press, this was while Reedy was still there just before Reedy left, that he said, "There'll be no more newspapers in the White House. Stop delivery." This lasted only for a matter of hours, because Dick Goodwin and maybe some other people went to him and said, "My God, you can't do that." As I recall, someone got him out of it by saying that the order wasn't to keep newspapers out of the White House but that the White House was no longer going to pay for all the newspapers that various staff members wanted, that that's what had been meant by it.

M: Face saving?

R: Yes. They could buy them all. There were several other things at that time that made you wonder if the man wasn't then losing his grip and really about to flip, and I know I wrote about this, though I never went into that newspaper story. I think that all of a sudden this got to him somehow and that that's why he brought Moyers in, just for that brief period there was a kind of wild aspect to the presidency. He brought other people and there were several changes at the same time. I don't remember them all. I think, incidentally, he brought Moyers in and Fortas in at the same time, didn't he?

M: Pretty close.

R: It was in the same announcement, I think, pretty close.

M: Maybe.

R: But he did several things that in the light of the moment looked very rational and useful and one felt, "No, he hasn't flipped. He's on top of it and can see where he's gone wrong and is doing something about it."

M: Do you think his alleged obsession with secrecy was maybe worse than other presidents you have had the privilege of watching?

R: I never had much of a problem with that. I mean you're talking about secrecy in appointments and that sort of thing?

M: Yes, this type of thing.

R: That's the kind of thing I never worry about until they've been done. I mean I don't feel it's my job to find out who's going to be appointed to this or that beforehand. No, I think that all presidents want to be fairly secretive, and I think up to a point it's probably in the public interest. I think he got probably a worse rap than he deserved over that, and I don't know as it was really an obsession.

M: Did reporters, people you know and colleagues in the press corps, just dislike Johnson, or did he just dislike them? Was that part of the trouble that ultimately occurred?

R: I don't know anybody who had much to do with him who disliked him. In fact, all of my friends who saw a great deal of him rather liked him. They distrusted him, which is something else, but I think there was always kind of personal admiration that he could count on there. Now, [there was] vast distrust.

M: Distrust of what he said or of what he might do?

R: Mostly distrust of what he said and a feeling that, "It isn't

necessarily so because he said it's so." They thought he was a liar. Of course, they think all politicians are liars and to a degree that's the case, but I think there was more suspicion that Johnson might be trying to snow you than of other people.

M: I was just thinking, you mentioned the 1957 Civil Rights Act a while ago. I'm from Arkansas. I remember Orval Faubus coming back and saying, "Just because I said it doesn't make it so."

R: Yes.

M: You're quoting practically the same words there. Did Mr. Johnson have particular dislikes and favorites among the press corps that were obvious to everybody?

R: Well, gee, I don't know. I'm sure he did, and I don't know as I'd be able to sort them all out because I never spent that much time in the White House. He was very fond of about my closest friend in Washington, Peter Lisagor of the Chicago Daily News. I think probably, and I hope to goodness somebody does him.

M: He's on our list.

R: Yes. He was certainly a kind of favorite. I think Hugh Sidey may have been something of a favorite.

M: Until he wrote a book.

R: Until he wrote a book. Well, the book was just the stuff that appeared in Life, wasn't it?

M: I understand the White House didn't think much of it.

R: Really? I think maybe Chuck Roberts of Newsweek, while he was there, was something of a favorite.

M: Did he have some fairly widely known dislikes?

R: Not that I know of. Not that I can recall at any rate. I think probably he disliked and distrusted most easterners, the New York Times, people he either thought were against him. Just based on the evening I mentioned and a few other things I think Johnson's basic posture toward everyone was a kind of surface dislike. I think the only person I ever heard him praise was McNamara, and if I recall, even that was qualified. Last week we were thinking back to the business of Arthur Schlesinger saying that Kennedy had said he'd fire Rusk, and three or four people who'd known Johnson fairly well, oh, I guess it was Clark Clifford who said that in his time Johnson had said if he stayed on he'd fire "every goddamned one of his Cabinet members, that Clifford was no good, Rusk was no good," you know, "Get rid of them all." And two minutes later, of course, he [changed]. But I mean I don't think he had very much good to say for anyone. But,on the other hand,his actions belied this, I mean he'd keep on trusting people.

M: Could you tell that he made any distinction between an analyst, columnist such as yourself, and, say, a wire service reporter or someone who was working maybe without by-lines and so on? Did he go out of his way to deal with the columnist types?

R: Oh, yes. Yes. Those sessions in the White House were kind of the elite of the press corps for the most part, I think. Every president does that. They sometimes do it on a not very reasonable basis. I remember somebody saying that it meant more to most politicians

in Washington to get a word of praise from Arthur Krock, whom practically no one in the country read, than to get a big banner from the AP. So sure, there's that kind of discrimination. There's also a kind of seniority system working in the Washington press corps. But I'm sure he was most attentive to those whom he thought could do him the most good or cut his losses the most and that sort of thing.

M: Did you get any response from your Waist Deep in the Big Muddy when it appeared?

R: From the White House?

M: From the White House.

R: I'm trying to think. I don't think, no. I certainly didn't from Johnson or anybody. Oh, I did. I did from John Roche, who was there, and we had a little correspondence arguing this point and that.

I'll tell you one response I did get from Johnson, maybe this will be profitable to go into at greater length, but the one thing that I was kind of abreast of the whole time with Johnson was the Eric Goldman business. Shortly after Eric went in there, you know, he got all these people together, or not together but he had a list, and he asked me to write a memo for the President on the politics of the War on Poverty, what would be the domestic, international political things. I wrote him a memo saying that I thought he could do nothing better for himself both as a domestic and world leader, and pointed out that Franklin Roosevelt reached the height of his popularity around the world when the world thought of him as someone who

was doing something for the poor and disadvantaged in his own country, and that his stature as an international leader couldn't help but rise if he pursued this. I did get a response from that from him; you know, something like, "That's very interesting and I think you're probably right."

M: In writing?

R: In writing, yes. On anything I wrote on foreign policy, except for the occasional notes from Goldman and Roche, I don't think I got any, not from the White House.

M: You said it might be worth going into more on the Goldman thing.

R: Yes.

M: I agree.

R: Do you want to do that, talk about the Goldman thing a minute?

M: Yes, I think that's important.

R: I had known Goldman quite well for some time before all this. I was in Washington, [and] I just ran into him on the street one day when he was going over to the White House to talk about whatever Johnson wanted to talk to him about. This is in the middle of the morning or the middle of the afternoon or something of that sort, and we agreed to meet for whatever meal came up next when he was through at the White House. He stayed on there, as he reports in his book, for hours and called up and said, "I can't make it." Or he had somebody call me, I forget which. Then the next day he told me what was up.

I was the only person, really, that he knew in Washington at that time and damn near the only person he knew very well when he left. I saw a great deal of him and had a great deal of correspondence and talk with him all through that period, and also am the unidentified person in his book who arranged his departure. I don't know if you read the book.

M: I've read the book.

R: You know the story in the end about they wouldn't let him off the hook, and he wanted to get out. He brought this to me and I proposed--I forget, I think in the book it's rather sketchy--he assemble a little group of writers, the very same sort of people whom Johnson was having upstairs all the time, in the Occidental for lunch one day, just off-the-record lunch, and that he tell them that he was getting out and why and get it into the papers that way. Well, I say I did it; the idea was mine, the execution of it wasn't. Pete Lisagor took over the arrangements, because by the time it was ready to be done I wasn't going to be in Washington anymore. So that is the story of that. Goldman is really the only documentable case to my knowledge of Johnson's really destroying a person, or [the experience of] working for Johnson being destructive. He went in there with immense enthusiasm. He disliked Kennedy, I think to a large degree because he didn't like the Kennedy academic crowd. I mean, they weren't his gang.

M: That's right.

R: He was much higher on Johnson than any man had a right to be.

M: When he went in?

R: When he went in, yes. And he came out much lower on him that he had a right to be. So much so that I couldn't believe that this book was going to be any good, because it seemed to me when he left his vision was so distorted that it wasn't in him to be halfway reasonable or fair about anything. But he, in my opinion at least--

(Interruption: Telephone rings.)

M: Do you think that Goldman's disillusionment was based on policies, or the way that Johnson treated him or what?

R: Well, I think it was several things. It was a discovery of what Johnson was like, and Johnson wasn't really like what he thought he was like. I think Johnson pretty soon discovered that there wasn't much Goldman could do for him, and all this business about bringing in ideas and that just didn't amount to much, particularly when the ideas got to be hostile, "Pull out of Vietnam" and that sort of thing.

M: That wasn't the kind of idea he had in mind.

R: No. Then Eric had his own ego problems, and he obviously wasn't playing the role that Arthur Schlesinger played in the Kennedy Administration. That wasn't the highest, you know, but he saw very little of Johnson and Johnson snubbed him when he did see him. Well, he tells about it in the book. I was with him the day that Johnson thought he'd leaked something or other and he hadn't, and he really bawled him out. The president of Princeton would never treat a man that way.

M: Right.

R: And then he found himself at the end working--well, he had no protectors.

M: Right.

R: First, he had Walter Jenkins as a protector, and he was very fond of Walter Jenkins. Jenkins gave him all kinds of good advice about how to deal with Johnson and how not to deal with Johnson. Jenkins went and I think Moyers and the others--all this is clear from the book--weren't very high on him, didn't have much use for him, and he wound up as Lady Bird's clerk writing memos on how the Library should function and that sort of thing. When I say Johnson destroyed him I don't really mean there was any deliberate attempt. I don't think Johnson really destroyed people. I think the experience of working with this monster was destructive. I don't think he said, "I'm going to ruin Goldman." Not at all, but Goldman nevertheless was ruined. He didn't have much to do. Well, that's destructive in itself.

M: Sure.

R: But I saw him with such frequency that I could just trace this movement. A lot of this is also in my correspondence with him in Madison, but he was probably the person I knew the best in the whole administration.

M: Were you involved in the Festival of the Arts thing?

R: Yes, I was involved in the sense that I knew all the problems and was trying to think of ways around them and that sort of thing. I didn't go to it. I went to a kind of warm up for it [that] I don't think he mentions in the book.

M: No, he doesn't.

R: And they--what the hell was it, the high school . . .?

M: Presidential Fellow?

R: No. No, this was--

M: He does mention that.

R: Well, this was for the leading high school graduates, I think, and there was kind of a mini-festival. They had John Updike and John Cheever and several people reading, playing instruments, and that sort of thing. Which was just, as I recall, a couple of weeks before the Festival of the Arts. He was deep in the planning for it then.

M: Do you think the story of the Festival of the Arts, which is really the heart of the book, actually the only thing which he was really closely involved in, came out in the book as you understood it to be coming out at the time.

R: Yes, I think so. I don't know. There is this little business about what Saul Maloff said to Saul Bellow and that that seems to be in the dispute, but I think by and large it's what I remember of it. Incidentally, I don't think--well, I think it is the

center of the book, but I think contrary to my expectations, it's a very useful book. It's not a very attractive book.

M: Right. Not compared to some of the ones you'd expect from Eric Goldman from his past books.

R: Yes.

M: They're very attractive.

R: But I don't think he comes out attractively, or Johnson. But on the other hand I think it's pretty fair, and from all the things that I know anything about it's quite accurate.

M: His characterization of Johnson and the Metroamerican?

R: Well, I don't know about the Metroamerican thing. That seems to me a kind of gimmick that I'm not sure of. The thing that stunned me the most in the book, and I found it rather hard to believe, was that passage about Johnson saying that all these senators were in touch with the Russians. Do you remember that?

M: Right, right.

R: I never heard that, and last week I brought it up in Washington with two friends of mine. A name I didn't mention as knowing quite a bit about him and maybe being a favorite was Carroll Kilpatrick of the Washington Post.

M: Of course.

R: I was asking Carroll and Pete Lisagor and a couple of other people if this was really true, if Johnson did have this notion

of communists being behind [anti-war sentiment]. They said it was absolutely true. I think Goldman just had the one instance of it, but they said there were many instances of it. That was a curious thing about Johnson, because he'd say that sort of thing, and he'd say that "The Russians have gotten to Fulbright" or something like that, but he'd never act on it. I don't know to what degree it was just a kind of metaphor or a way of talking or something, but there's never been any evidence that he worked on the basis that that was true. I still don't know. I still think it may have been that kind of exaggerated style of his that he concealed from the public. You know, if he'd been crazy enough to believe that he would have done some kind of crazy thing in the country.

M: Right.

R: I don't know.

M: One of the best things in your book on Vietnam is your discussion, I think, of the liberal anti-communist establishment [where] you say, "The situation changed. They don't realize that they were once what they are criticizing now." Do you think this is a definable group that had a lot to do with destroying Mr. Johnson's public image and ultimately his presidency?

R: I don't know. Everything has changed so much since I wrote that book that I don't know. I was trying to say several things:

that you couldn't say that Lyndon Johnson started all this, that it didn't go back into the Kennedy Administration and the Eisenhower and the Roosevelt and all the rest of it; and I was also trying to say that Vietnam was not all that different from Korea. I mean there are certain obvious differences, but it's--

M: You had a long column about that before the book came out.

R: Yes, right. That's part of the book.

M: Part of the book.

R: Yes. I think that there are an awful lot of people, myself among them, who ought to be examining their own earlier assumptions in the light of all this, and who are not doing it. I think this is unfair to Johnson and unfair to everybody. Now these people are, of course, opinion makers in one way or another, and I'm not just talking about writers and politicians. I'm sure that they played a very considerable part in destroying Johnson, yes. But I think that Johnson started out with great reservoirs of support. There were lots of people like myself, who if he ever thought about us I'm sure he thought were Kennedy people and eastern liberals and that sort of thing. But I know in my own case, and a lot of people, I really had more feeling of warmth about Johnson in his early days than I did for Kennedy. I think he simply never knew that. It's a very common thing about politicians. Bobby Kennedy, for example, always thought

that New York intellectuals were against him, because a few of them had supported Keating and that sort of thing. He felt uncomfortable in New York, at least in the first years as senator. If it hadn't been for Vietnam, I think Johnson would really have had no problems.

M: I think sometimes the White House either saw or imagined they saw a sort of a conscious effort on the part of some of the eastern intellectual types, Kennedy people, to destroy him with the opinion makers. Did you ever notice that this existed?

R: Well, I think this was the case in the people who were really very close to Kennedy, people who were in the White House and around the administration here and there. I think he had a right to distrust them, and they of course distrusted him. Well, I was going to say I don't think what he imagined existed really did. I can't say that. I mean, there was almost immediately, I think, a certain criticism of style and of his crudeness and the rest, but I don't think it would have counted for anything. I think it would have been overcome if he'd been able to devote himself to the country instead of to the war.

M: Right.

R: I think those are minor problems. After all, Harry Truman got the same kind of criticism. He followed an elegant figure, and he seemed much less up to it than Johnson did, and just as western or midwestern,

and people grew very fond of him in spite of all that. This kind of goes against my sense of history to attribute so many things to one event, but I think that in the case of Johnson and Vietnam, that's just it.

M: It is.

R: Yes. Subtract Vietnam from the last five or six years and I think it would be very different. It's rather a large event to take out of the equation.

M: In the light of all the difficulties he had with eastern intellectuals and in the light of one of my favorite of your articles, on the American Establishment, did the American Establishment decline then under Johnson or did the McCloy, Lovett, et al. group continue to play the same kind of role in government that they had before and perhaps will in the future?

R: Well, I think certainly in foreign policy, and for a while at least, those people went along with him. That Establishment thing was really a big spoof.

M: I know, but interviewing all these people in this project I'm impressed with how true that levity was.

R: Yes. But I always say in this argument about Johnson and Vietnam you've got to ask yourself, "Who the hell gave us Johnson? Who gave us Dean Rusk? Who gave us McNamara? Who gave us the Bundys and the Rostow brothers?" You know, Kennedy did or the Establishment did, and they stayed on under Johnson and there they were. I suppose there was a turning point when somebody like Averell Harriman, for

example, turned against the war, or a man I see quite often, Tom Finletter, who was part of that.

M: I've interviewed him.

R: He at some point turned bitterly against it. I don't think anybody turned against the war because they thought Lyndon Johnson was a bad man. I don't think the anti-war feeling had much to do with anti-Johnson feeling. It had something to do with it no doubt, because as I said, I think Kennedy might have had a little longer lease on the whole thing, drawn a little less fire. Although I think in the end it would have come out the same way. I think the war is irrational and awful, and it just would have become apparent no matter who the hell was in charge.

M: The so-called Establishmentarians that you know, did most of them turn against it before the end?

R: What do you mean, before the end?

M: Let's say, before March 31. Had most of them by then decided that we should cut our losses and that it was a bad investment and so on?

R: Oh, I think so. I think so. I think in 1966 and 1967. The escalation was just too much. I think from the summer of 1965 on, your support was just down all the way. A leader of this group would be Walter Lippmann, who incidentally was very high on Johnson and had been closer to him than he would now like to admit.

M: Right.

R: He turned at the first sign of escalation. I think people around here did. I did.I wasn't particularly offended by Vietnam until it became

Americanized and troops by the hundreds of thousands were going over. In that summer of 1965 there was considerable speculation in advance, hints that there were going to be a lot of troops sent over. I was up in Maine staying with the Lippmanns, and he had written a couple of columns saying he didn't give a damn how many troops went there but he was concerned with their mission. That is, he wanted to pull back, he wanted the enclaves thing.

M: Right.

R: And if pulling back meant that you needed more men to hold the enclaves, that was all right with him. He'd just written that the morning that the big announcement or one of the big announcements had been made, and George Ball called up. We were both on the phone with him, and Ball said, "Well, Walter, you've won. That's what they're going for. You'll be very pleased to know that; that they're going, but on this limited mission." I've never known whether Ball was duped somehow or whether the whole State Department might have been. But he said, "The reason we're sending them there. . ."

M: I have an appointment with Ball next week. I'll try to pursue that. That's worth finding out about.

R: Tell him that somebody said it; don't tell him that I did.

M: Oh, no. Don't worry. Don't worry, we don't tell them anything.

R: I've seen him a lot since then, but I've never brought this up. It's too painful.

M: Right. That can be done tactfully without even disclosing that it's ever been heard at all.

Are there any subjects regarding President Johnson or his career that you think are worthwhile that we haven't gone into? I don't want to limit you or in any way restrict your remembrances here.

R: Nothing comes to my mind, unless something comes to yours.

M: I think some of your comments have been very helpful on various subjects here.

R: No. I can't think of anything very important that I can think of and that I haven't already put in print one way or another.

M: Well, it's certainly nice of you to give us so much time in the middle of your afternoon. We appreciate it very much.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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