INTERVIEW VI

DATE: December 9, 1983

INTERVIEWEE: JAMES H. ROWE, JR.

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. Rowe's residence, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: You indicated that the real reason that Johnson and the southerners opposed including the primaries in this election reform [bill] was that they didn't want to be covered.

R: Yes. They hadn't been. They never had been; they didn't want to be covered.

G: Did you try to persuade Johnson to accept that?

R: Yes, I did. Got nowhere.

G: Really?

R: You know, an awful lot of his base, of his power down there, was in the southerners, so he wasn't taking them on unless he had to.

G: You also had the opposition to the Supreme Court's decision in the Brown case heating up that year, in 1956. There was the Southern Manifesto.

R: Yes, which Johnson did not sign. People think he signed it. I heard Carl Rowan a few years ago in a broadcast saying "You can always get these fellows to reform. Now, look at Lyndon Johnson, the man who put through civil rights, but before that he'd signed the Southern Manifesto," which he never had. It must have taken a lot of courage for him not to do it, too, you know. Dick Russell and all that crowd were for it.

Johnson, whether he was a prescient fellow on this point or not, wouldn't sign it.

G: Did you have any conversations with him about that, as to why he didn't sign it?

R: I don't remember. I may have. It seemed to me as he shouldn't sign it. I don't even remember if I was surprised that he didn't sign it. He and one other [southern] senator didn't sign it, I've forgotten who the other senator was.

G: It was [Estes] Kefauver, wasn't it?

R: Kefauver?

G: I believe it was.

R: I guess it was, yes. [William] Fulbright signed it. It was quite a courageous thing for Johnson to do.

G: He took the position I think that since he was part of the leadership--

R: He should stay out of it. Yes.

G: Did the southerners pressure him to sign?

R: I don't know. I have a feeling Dick Russell did, because the manifesto was Russell's idea really, I think. He was a fellow that had great influence with Johnson. I think if Johnson had done it, it would have ruined his career; he never would have gone anywhere after that. But I may be wrong.

G: Segregated education was an issue in federal aid to school construction. Do you recall any efforts there to get this education aid passed with or without the segregation?

R: I don't know, I don't. I remember some conversation about Virginia was very bad at it, and Harry Byrd was sort of the leader of that place and he was a segregationist. I don't remember whether Johnson got involved or not.

G: Any recollections of the highway bill?

R: No.

G: Really? Senator Gore's interest in supporting that, Albert Gore?

R: No. But Johnson was for it, wasn't he? He didn't like Gore much though.

G: Johnson seems to have had an annual battle with the administration and Ezra Taft Benson over farm legislation.

R: I wouldn't be surprised.

G: Were you involved in his work there?

R: Johnson, when I was working for him at some stage, answered Ike's veto. Ike vetoed and made a speech about it. I wrote the speech for Johnson. It was a rather good speech as a matter of fact. I didn't know anything about agriculture. I remember we got Herb Waters, who was working for [Hubert] Humphrey and later on I think [was] under secretary of agriculture, I can't remember. But he wrote a speech which was not very good; it was factually correct, and we wrote it from there. I can remember my contribution was to use the old Roosevelt technique. Roosevelt used to make speeches on behalf of farmers to city folks, so he didn't have to be too explicit. He would say, now, farmers need this and parity is this and so forth. So Johnson did the same thing. It was a pretty good speech. He was

nervous, the first time I realized how nervous he got on television. He got nervous then and nervous all the rest of his life I guess. I've never known why.

G: The water shortages and drought conditions in Texas was a matter of great concern in the mid-fifties.

R: I don't remember anything about it.

G: Did you observe his efforts there?

R: No. Remember, we're talking about thirty years ago, aren't we? Yes. I'll tell you who was working for him in those days, Mrs. Eckhardt. Do you ever run into her in Austin?

G: Nadine Eckhardt?

R: Nadine, yes.

G: No.

R: She's living there now.

G: Is she?

R: Yes. She divorced the Congressman, ex-Congressman [Bob Eckhardt]. She may be married again, I don't know. I had a note from her saying she was moving. She was down in Houston, she was moving back to Austin.

G: How much interest did Johnson take in the Senate Preparedness Committee at that point?

R: Was he on it?

G: He had chaired it.

R: Had he?

G: Yes.

R: I don't really remember. At one stage, I went up to Cambridge to talk to Vannevar Bush. I went up with--Eddie Weisl didn't come with me, who was it? It wasn't Cy Vance. Maybe it was Gerry Siegel. But a couple of us went up to see Vannevar Bush to be a witness on the, whatever it was, I guess the beginning of the NASA program. Vannevar Bush and there was some other fellow from Harvard. Oh, [George B.] Kistiakowsky, he's dead now, who was the famous Harvard scientist. We got both of them to be witnesses at Johnson's I think first presentation of the Preparedness Committee.

G: Do you think Johnson grasped the significance of the space program early on?

R: I don't know whether he grasped it, but he knew it was a new vehicle and he wanted to grab it.

G: Did he see it as a vehicle for political advantage?

R: I assume he did. He did most things. He was a politician. But he was an imaginative fellow, you know. The kind of thing he'd get behind, other people wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole.

G: Now, you talked about this earlier, but let me ask you to go into it again, and that is your election reform bill and your work on that.

R: Yes. That came out of the scandal that some fellow dropped into South Dakota and left some money for then-Senator [Francis] Case. When Case heard about it, he screamed bloody murder publicly and everybody ran for cover. Johnson's cure for it was to get an election reform bill on money. I can't remember what was in it, but we all worked on it: Phil Graham, [Adrian] Butch Fisher--who else worked on it?--a number

of people around town drafting it. Johnson, I really think he had about ninety senators on the bill. It was in good shape. Then the fire went out of the issue and he dropped it and everybody else dropped it.

G: Now you said you had two provisions that you supported. One was--

R: One was for getting primaries subject to the bill, which they never had been, because the southern Democrats didn't want it. I guess Republicans never wanted any reform anyway. That was one. That didn't get anywhere and Johnson killed it.

The other was to get free television for politicians, that television had to give so much time for--I've forgotten how we worked it out. You had to be a presidential candidate, probably a Senate candidate, and after the primaries. I've forgotten who was pushing it, but I pushed it on both Johnson and Phil Graham [who] was working on it. Phil was then running the Washington Post. As I say, I can remember this frozen look I got from both of them, a dead silence and a frozen look. It took me about five minutes to realize why, so I said all right, forget it.

G: They both owned television stations?

R: They both owned television stations.

G: There was also a provision in that legislation, wasn't there, about limiting contributions to a thousand dollars?

R: Probably, I can't remember it now. Something like that.

G: There was a very controversial bill that would lower the benefit age

of social security and increase some of the benefits. Do you remember that?

R: No, no. Was Johnson for it or against it?

G: Well, he was for it and that was the old age and survivor insurance section. Earle Clements was the deciding vote on passing that and then [in his re-election race] the doctors voted against him--

R: And beat him?

G: Yes. Do you remember that issue at all?

R: No. Jim Murray of Montana was always active trying to get medical help in social security. He never got very far with it.

G: Well, Senator Byrd was chairman of the Finance Committee.

R: It was hard to get things through, yes. I've told you the story about Byrd and the labor bill, I'm sure.

G: That is recorded in the Library in one of the exhibits. Have you heard that?

R: I think I did hear it over there. Yes.

G: Very effective.

R: Yes.

G: Did Byrd really run the committee?

R: No, he ran it. He was a pretty iron-handed fellow about it and was very reactionary. If Johnson really wanted something, he'd go along with him, he liked Johnson.

G: The administration submitted its civil rights program that spring. Of course, the legislation was not passed until 1957, the following year,

but let me ask you about the civil rights program in 1956, do you remember?

R: The civil rights program all meld into one with me. Had Johnson passed his yet? Didn't he get one through? Is this the one he got through?

G: He did in 1957.

R: 1957. Not until then.

G: But this was the year before.

R: Was that the one that Ben Cohen and Dean Acheson worked on? I think.

G: I thought they worked on 1957.

R: Maybe it's 1957. Yes. Did Johnson do anything about it in 1956?

G: Well, I don't think he helped it any. I'm just wondering if you recall any discussions with him?

R: I can't remember.

G: This was essentially an administration proposal. I assume that [Herbert] Brownell was the author of it.

The liberal Democrats set up their own machinery there in the Democratic Advisory Council. Joe Rauh and others attempted to make policy, an alternative to the Johnson [inaudible].

R: I remember that, yes.

G: Do you recall Johnson's reaction to that?

R: Yes. I remember they wanted Johnson to be a member of the advisory council. He wouldn't be, on the grounds that Rayburn already said he wouldn't be so how could Johnson. Then they--what the hell was the chairman of the Democratic [National] Committee then? I can't remember

his name, which I should remember. I can remember going with Johnson to a party at the Democratic National Committee at the Mayflower Hotel. An awful lot of people were there. What's his name had made some statement on policy, and the Congress ought to pass this and the leadership wasn't doing anything about it. Johnson walked into this place--I didn't know he was going to do it, I walked in with him. He went up to--who the hell was that guy?

G: Was it Steve Mitchell or Paul Butler?

R: Paul Butler. And he just cussed him out publicly, I never heard a man being cussed out [like that], just gave him hell. From that time on they were mortal enemies. I can't remember what it was, but Butler accused Johnson of not doing something with the leadership. Johnson made a great point of it was his business and not Butler's business.

I thought the advisory council was a rather useful thing, as a matter of fact. It had people like Acheson and Stevenson in there. Butler was a difficult fellow; you couldn't do anything with him.

G: Did Johnson ever establish some lines of communication with the group? Did he ever use it?

R: No. No. He was always against it. May have heard [inaudible] was against it, wouldn't do anything for it. He didn't like Adlai Stevenson, he did like Acheson, didn't like Kefauver. Humphrey was on it, he always was sort of ambivalent about Humphrey both ways.

G: Sure. What did you observe about the relationship between Johnson and Nixon that year that you were working [for him]?

R: He didn't like Nixon. He was always trying to get Nixon in trouble if he could.

G: Really? Any recollections of how he would do that?

R: I can't remember. Some bill, I can't remember what it was, Johnson was against and Nixon was for. Nixon was vice president then, wasn't he? Yes. He came up to Johnson after the vote in which Johnson won, said, "Lyndon, you won tonight, but I'll have the votes the next time." This is a quote, of course, I'm quoting Johnson. And Johnson said, "You may be right about next time, but tonight I had the votes, you didn't." I remember that, and he was very pleased with himself. What the hell the bill was I don't know.

G: Did he trust Nixon?

R: No, he didn't ever like him. I don't think he disliked him as much as Sam Rayburn did, but he didn't like him. I don't know anybody who liked him.

G: Now, Johnson supported a constitutional amendment to abolish the poll tax in federal elections that year. Any recollections of that?

R: No, except that he did, and it was overdue. I don't mean his support, but I mean the poll tax thing was overdue.

G: He was a favorite son candidate that year for president.

R: 1956?

G: Yes.

R: Johnson?

G: Right.

R: A little more than favorite son I think.

G: Let me ask you to recall what you can about that.

R: Well, I went out to Chicago with him. I got there and realized that he was an odd candidate; if any delegates wanted to see him, he'd see them but he wouldn't go out after them. So he sort of sat around the hotel. It became apparent after a while that Stevenson was going to get the nomination but he had to get either Michigan or Texas; he had to get the liberals or the conservatives. His manager was Jim--what the hell was his name?

G: Flannigan? Finnegan?

R: Jim Finnegan was playing one against the other. He'd go see the people from Michigan, say, "You know, if you're not going to come with us, we're going to have to go with the Texans. That means Lyndon Johnson. You don't want that." And he'd come in and see us and say the same thing, "You don't want [G. Mennon] Soapy Williams and the Auto Workers running it." Went back and forth. I can remember--somebody told me, I know who it was, it was a young labor leader who said that [Walter] Reuther had met with the Stevenson people and said, "It will take me a day to break Soapy Williams, but I'll get him tomorrow and you'll have the votes tomorrow night." He told me that in the middle of the night and I went in and told Johnson, woke him up, said, "You've got about three or four hours if you want to run this convention." He said, "I don't believe you're right," and I said, "I am right." For some reason he didn't want to go for Stevenson, must have been Texas. Texas was all Eisenhower. So he didn't do it. [He] saw Stevenson and said he thought he was going to get the nomination,

but he didn't vote for him. Who did he vote for? I guess the Texas crowd voted for Johnson for president. That was the end of that. (Interruption)

G: Well, was Johnson at all interested in the vice presidential nomination that year?

R: Yes and no. Oh, he'd come back--this was 1956, wasn't it?

G: Yes.

R: He'd come back to see Eisenhower about Suez or Hungary, I can never remember which one. Eisenhower called all the leadership back, and Rayburn and Johnson went back, and Clements, to Washington. He'd also called in Dick Russell, who wasn't at the convention, and Russell came back with them to the convention. I remember this well because I had written Johnson a memorandum saying, "You're not going to go anywhere. You must know that at this convention. Adlai is going to get the nomination, and Adlai is not going to win the election, he's going to get nominated. So you better be quiet and stay out of harm's way." One of the sentences I put in there, "You don't want to be like Dick Russell, who was a good man until he ran for president and then turned into a real reactionary." Then I left the memo for him to take with him. Johnson came back, said, "This is a fine memorandum you wrote. Earle Clements agreed with it. Dick Russell agreed with it." I said, "My God, Lyndon, you didn't show it to Russell, did you?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Thank you."

Then after Stevenson was nominated I think Russell and [Thomas] Corcoran prevailed on Johnson that he ought to run for vice president.

I didn't think it was a good idea because I didn't think Stevenson was going to take him. They sent me in to talk to Stevenson and to Finnegan, which I did, and said, "I'm a little surprised about this, but Lyndon Johnson wants to be vice president." Stevenson made a flowery speech about Johnson as one of the great leaders of this country. Finnegan sat there, didn't say a word. I said, "That's my message, gentlemen," and left. I went back into the suite, and by that time they'd changed their minds. Johnson said, "Go back and tell Stevenson"--I remember this about Lyndon Johnson--"no Texan wants to be vice president." That would leave out himself and Rayburn. So I told them that. Stevenson, anyway, threw the convention open and Kefauver won.

G: This was before Stevenson threw it open?

R: Yes. Yes.

G: Well, where did the candidacy of Albert Gore come from, do you recall?

R: Yes. The question was with Texas and the vice president run--it ended up in a Kefauver and Kennedy race--who Texas should be for. Johnson wanted to be for Hubert Humphrey, but he couldn't move the delegation that fast, and Humphrey wasn't showing any strength any other place. So we agreed--I've forgotten who "we" were--that Texas would vote on the first ballot for Gore. No, not for Gore, for the Governor of Tennessee, [Frank] Clement, and Clement announced, he told us he'd already pulled out in favor of Gore, so they voted for Gore the first ballot. They didn't expect to stay there. Johnson didn't like Gore and I don't think Rayburn did.

So then at the next caucus the question was who they should be for, Kefauver or Kennedy. They were the only ones showing strength. Johnson pushed the delegation to Kennedy. I remember at one stage he and I walked over to the next delegation [which] was Oklahoma, and Johnson put the pressure on I think the Governor of Oklahoma to be for Kennedy, and the Governor looked at him, said, "My God, man, have you lost your mind? Kennedy, with his terrible farm record, and he's a Catholic! The answer is no!" So he voted for Kefauver. Johnson went for Kennedy, made a fiery speech about it, about the man who risked his life in battle for all of us and so forth, quite a good speech. That's about it.

G: Was Johnson disappointed at the way the convention turned out?

R: I don't think he really had any idea about being vice president except for that minute, and he obviously showed no strength, or didn't try to show any strength with the delegates. I don't know why he did it. He had a bunch of Texans who were no damn good trying to help him. And they were no good in 1960 either.

G: To what extent were his moves calculated to keep [Allan] Shivers from influencing the Democratic Party?

R: I don't know. There was an enmity there certainly. I never realized Shivers was a pretty good man until recently, which actually he was.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview VI

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