INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: HUGH SIDEY

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE MULHOLLAN

PLACE: Washington, D. C.

Tape 1 of 1

M: The purpose is obviously not to make you duplicate things that you have written. I've tried to read not only your books but as many of the columns as was possible, so if I ask you things that you think you've written adequately about, say so and I'll just switch off, because we're not trying to duplicate what Time-Life has printed or anybody else has printed.

Let's identify. You're Hugh Sidey, and you are the author of books on both the Kennedy Administration and President Johnson, as well as a weekly column for Life on the presidency since 1966, May 1966 about.

S: Yes.

M: You mentioned in numerous of your writings your original contact with Mr. Johnson was when he was in the Senate back in the fifties. How close did you actually cover him personally during that period?

S: That was a very close relation. I remember the first time I met him. I came down from New York here, and I was here in this bureau I guess about a year with Life. Then I was assigned to the Senate. That was in 1957. I was the senior congressional correspondent, and I covered more or less the Senate and the major legislative efforts up there.

Perhaps the first kind of contact I had with the Johnson camp was with George Reedy. George Reedy on an early evening when I was there took me in to see the Majority Leader, Lyndon Johnson. It was one of those incredible hour sessions with Lyndon Johnson in which he sketched the whole broad picture. He talked with knowledge and understanding about Time magazine, about who edited it and its deadlines. He knew as much about the magazine as I did. He questioned us. He was alternately outraged and sympathetic. It was that traditional Johnson treatment in which, as a new member, he literally scared the wits out of me.

M: He did all the talking?

S: He did the talking, but it was a great tornado of an event, in which he said, "I know your editors. I know they're against me. They're Republicans up there." But he also said, "I'd rather have one line in Time magazine or in the New York Times than I would in all the other newspapers in the country." He was fascinated with the national character of Time magazine.

If you go back in that time, in the fifties, Time magazine had a tremendous impact. Television hadn't really come on like it is today. The New York Times was far more regional or limited to New York City than it is today. You didn't have as many good newspapers around the country. The Washington Post wasn't that much. The [St. Louis] Post-Dispatch or the L.A. Times hadn't begun to build up.

M: And he was interested in projecting beyond a regional--

S: He was interested in his national image. There's just no question about it. And he considered Time magazine very vital, as did John Kennedy,

by the way. I remember Kennedy in that time, as he went toward the presidency, saying, "They read that goddamned magazine!" And he'd just get outraged because of little items in there.

So we had this first night. I guess that would have been some time in the winter of 1957 when I first went up there. It may have been early 1956--I'm terribly hazy on that date, but it was in 1957.

M: It was a long time ago.

S: Yes. I remember because the Civil Rights Bill was passed.

M: Well, that's 1957.

S: The first one. And I was in on that. I think that was in the summer of 1957. So I went up on the Hill, I believe it was probably the fall of 1956 or that winter.

But anyway, it was an incredible performance which made Lyndon Johnson an indelible figure in my mind. It just riveted, you know. Again, the physical technique of punching you and coming around and looking down at you.

M: Almost anybody, he could look down at.

S: That's right. But the alternate outrage at Time's Republicanism. He'd say, "I know what you're going to do to me. I know you're going to screw me. I know you. But all right, sometimes you haven't been bad, too. I know Mrs. Luce. I knew her over in the House. I knew Henry Luce." He went through the whole bit, so that he was both friend and foe. It was love-hate, you know. But to a journalist, it was totally fascinating.

I remember there was one other fellow, Neil McNeill. Both of us covered the Hill at that time. I was the senior correspondent and he was junior, but we were both fairly new. We walked out of there just dazed.

From that time on I had quite a close relationship with Johnson. He literally said--again, he knew when I wrote for Time magazine. In those days Time magazine went to press on Sunday night, but they did most of their editing through Saturday. He knew that correspondents had to file overnight Thursday, so that the editors in New York got the raw copy on Friday morning. So he said, "Thursday night is Time magazine's night. Now, I want you to come around. I don't want you to listen to other people. I don't want you taking anything you get by hearsay. I want you to come around and I'll tell you what happened."

And it literally came that way. I would go around about six or seven o'clock or sometimes a little earlier every Thursday night, and Lyndon Johnson would always have time to sit down and talk. Sometimes it would go on all night. He was drinking fairly heavily there, although I must say that in Lyndon Johnson's drinking I never saw him lose control. But he'd consume Scotch, just lots of it, oh, lots of it! He would come down from Ev Dirksen's office sometimes about six o'clock. You know, I'd be waiting there for him. I know he'd had three or four Scotches. They were those light Scotches because this was after his heart attack--half strength. But he would literally drain a glass in one gulp, you know. We'd start in, and it would be one of those routines. I would have half a dozen, and he'd have two or three more than I of this

kind of Scotches. We'd go through his mail, and he would take phone calls. John Connally--I remember I was there the night that Connally's daughter was killed, where Lyndon Johnson called him down in Florida. The girl was in a motel in Florida and had been accidentally killed. He'd call around the country, and he'd have me listen to him. He'd show me his mail.

M: Were you the only one there usually?

S: At this time, yes. I'm sure he did it with other reporters, but this was Time magazine's time.

M: That was their night.

S: And he revealed fascinating insights into how it worked. Sometimes other senators like Dick Russell would come in. Johnson, as you know, always had a streak of the actor in him.

M: I was going to say, did these things kind of seem staged?

S: A little bit, but the two were so closely related. Johnson was such an act anyway, it was part of the real thing. It didn't much matter. But sometimes Dick Russell would come in or John Kennedy, and he'd say, "Stay, stay, listen." Then he'd kind of play majority leader, you know. Totally mesmerized!

Frequently I was so drunk I literally couldn't write. Quite honestly, my wife used to say, boy, she knew every time when I'd been with Lyndon Johnson. I'd come in at nine o'clock or so just paralyzed.

But by and large I got tremendous insights into how he worked, his personality, and I got to know Lady Bird through this process.

Met Bill Moyers one day. I walked in, and here's this young kid

sitting at the desk for the first time.

M: Bill was around then twenty-four or something like that.

S: Sitting at this outer desk there under that big portrait of Lyndon. Moyers, you know, was kind of a brash but bright kid. We got to know each other then. So it was quite a close relationship.

M: We've been told by numerous of your colleagues that, as newsmen go, you had a better fix on Lyndon Johnson than anybody in town. I expect that this is why. Because you had that beginning back before he was less inclined to do that kind of thing.

S: Yes, it went clear back, and it was in a marvelous time of his, too. He was really at his peak. I think one of the greatest evenings I ever saw was--oh, it was ten or eleven o'clock at night--when they passed the Civil Rights Act.

M: In 1957.

S: 1957. That was the first one in a hundred years. And Lyndon Johnson had done that with his bare hands. He had put that together, organized everything, argued, had gotten through the filibuster--all of these things.

M: For those of you who were close to him then, did you get the idea that he pushed that through to show that he could, or because he believed in the principles involved?

S: I think at that time to show that he could. I think quite honestly it was a mechanical thing at that time. Now I have my feelings about Lyndon Johnson and race matters. I think that what he did for the blacks in this country may go down as his greatest monument in history.

And I think later on, as he became president of all the people rather than just majority leader, because he was a brilliant man, you know, he really understood what had happened to the blacks in America over those hundred years. I think, though, in those days he was so mesmerized with power and the manipulation of the Senate and a box score--he had a box score mentality, stacking up bills--that that played more of a part than the ideological part in it.

But even then, you know, he was moving onto the national stage, changing his concept. He wasn't a senator from Texas anymore. They were beginning to maneuver for the 1960 nomination. First off, I think this began as a power play and to change his own image, and to move out and to show that he was the leader and he could do this. Then I think it became a real deeply held conviction as he saw what it was all about.

M: How much did he lean on Mr. Sam during that period?

S: I think by that time Rayburn was beginning to fail as an effective leader. Sure, a great respect and a great following in the House, but he was an old man. He didn't have the national outlook that he had had. Still a great ally, but I think the stronger of the two, without any question, was Johnson by that time. Rayburn still essentially ran the House pretty well or had that control of the House of Representatives. And Lyndon used to go over there all the time. But I think the initiative and the whole thrust, the kind of momentum of everything--I think Johnson was the guy by that time. I think Eisenhower felt that, too, that Johnson was the guy that--

M: That why he used--

S: --provided the horsepower up there. And I really do. I don't think Sam's health failed--well, it did fairly shortly, it was only two or three years later. When did he die?

M: It was 1962 he died.

S: 1962, that's right. It was somewhat later. I don't want to depreciate him. He was still a big force, but his leadership after those years, 1957, 1958, was not the same as it had been. People began to complain in the House about "He was too old" and "He didn't sense the urgency of the issues," young men weren't given what they sometimes thought they would. But I think there was a great emotional well there.

Johnson talked about how he used to play around his father's desk in the state house when Mr. Rayburn was there, and then how Rayburn took him on up there. The Board of Education that Sam had. Lyndon went over there all the time. So there was still a deep, deep personal and emotional bond there.

As a senior congressional correspondent, that is why I covered the Senate, because that to me was where the action was.

M: Did any of his presidential enemies in the Senate date from those days? Is there anything in the criticism that people like Fulbright, for example, or others in the presidency period go back as far as the Senate days?

S: I think the seeds of anguish really in many of these men were planted there. Again, it was a love-hate relationship. They were frightened by Johnson; they were fascinated by him. But I didn't find many people that liked him immensely, just found him to be a wonderful

companion or a pleasant human being. That wasn't the relationship.

I was there that fabulous morning--and I don't know the full story of this and I don't know if Lyndon Johnson will ever tell it--when Teddy Green stepped down as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I remember Lyndon Johnson going over there and literally getting on his knees in front of the old man. I guess he told me this story later on. He said, "I literally got on my knees there and I said, 'Now, I don't want you getting out of this.'" And just as sure as I'm sitting here, Johnson engineered it, and it was for Bill Fulbright.

M: He engineered the retirement and protested it at the same time.

S: Yes. Engineered it. I'm sure that he planted the idea, and that he encouraged it, all the time protesting to Green. And Bill Fulbright got it. He did naturally, but in a strange way I think that Lyndon Johnson did it for Fulbright. I think there was another motive. I think perhaps back there he thought Fulbright was one of his boys. And, as a matter of fact, he was, in many ways, back there.

But Lyndon Johnson was interested in effective committees. It was all in the period [when] we were in the missile hassle, the preparedness subcommittee. So he was interested in that area.

I suspect again--Lyndon Johnson is a master calculator, you know--in his great alchemy for the 1960 thing, I think he saw the Senate Foreign Relations and Bill Fulbright as a good staunch part of his structure, a backer.

I remember Proxmire was a new senator, you know, and he very early began to chafe under Lyndon Johnson's leadership. The guys like

Tom Dodd liked him, and they got along. But I can remember the bitches about Johnson's autocratic ways from the young guys. John Kennedy himself, though a great admirer of his, used to get very upset. Smathers was a very close friend of Johnson's. He didn't care either way. And of course the old guys like Russell and these people, Johnson was their boy so there wasn't any problem. Oh, there was just a whole strata of people. And of course on the Republican side, George Aiken and people like that used to complain privately.

M: Am I wrong in thinking Johnson had pretty favorable press in those days? You've explained the difference in general terms between Senate press coverage and presidential press coverage, but he did have pretty good coverage, didn't he?

S: Oh, excellent press. He was a creation of the press. I mean, he was literally idolized. We had a cover story on him, about his leadership, that was just unbelievable. It made him out to be a god. Had I been the subject of it, I would have vomited. But not Lyndon!

M: He probably loved it.

S: He bitched because we had in it that he had gold [jewelry]. The writer came down from New York, Champ Clark, the grandson of the old Speaker, the son of Bennett Clark, the senator. Lyndon knew him. Champ Clark was the writer of that story, and he came down and he had one of those sessions with Johnson. He noticed that Johnson had a gold wristwatch, and a gold ring, and gold cuff links and gold stuff on his desk, and he put that in the story. And Johnson never got over it! Because apparently it made him out to be a kind of a fop or a dandy and it cast

aspersions on his kind of manhood. [In] that story he was Saint Paul, he was John the Baptist. But that one thing! He bitched about it, and he probably still is today because he never forgets.

M: That's what he remembers.

S: Yes. He never forgets. But his press was marvelous.

M: What did he do differently? Was he not already expressing the kind of things that got him into trouble later? This intense secretiveness?

S: It didn't matter. He was a senator from Texas and a majority leader, and the personal flaws that came out in the presidency didn't really matter up there. As a matter of fact, his ability to wheel and deal, his singular idea of the truth and how you use it at certain times--

M: That's a singular way to express his idea of truth.

S: But the idea that you could deceive in certain moments--you see, I never had any question about the nobility of Johnson's ultimate goals. I have never questioned his motives and don't today. What he wanted was, well, first, good for Lyndon Johnson--but that's all right, all politicians are like that, Abraham Lincoln was--and secondly, good for the nation. But to get to those goals he used every device that he could, and sometimes he just discarded the truth along the way. But he didn't do it out of bad motives. Anyway, that worked in the Senate.

M: So he didn't really change anything when he became president. He did the same things. It just didn't work in that office.

S: As I look back now, in my judgment, one of the reasons he became so unpopular and then probably decided not to run was that he never made that transition from majority leader to president where this kind of

deviousness and this kind of maneuver didn't work in the presidency, particularly in this age. It might have worked several years ago, but in the electronic age you just can't do it. Anyway, that's my opinion.

But up there it really worked. There were levers to push and guys to intimidate and people to lie to and people to be honest with. And he played it like an organ. Goddamn, it was beautiful! It was just marvelous. I think one of the best lines that I've ever read was in Bill Manchester's book, The Death of a President, where he said that Lyndon Johnson thought the shortest distance between two points was through a tunnel. And it's the ideal definition, by George, of how you operate in the Senate.

M: But not the presidency.

S: But not the presidency.

M: Did you follow his try for the nomination in 1960 very closely?

S: Yes, quite a bit. We had a very personal--we had a great strain over that. I don't know how he feels, but I had a great affection, and still do, for him. He has had his problems with young guys like Moyers and, I gather, myself from that. It has always been a problem with him to take somebody in kind of closely and then to see them criticize and to not agree, you know. I think some of that happened with me, that he became very disillusioned. And it began back in 1959, late 1959 and 1960, as we went into that presidential business.

I was pulled off and I reported the Time cover stories on Symington, Humphrey, Johnson and Kennedy--all of them. It was a brutal winter and fall. I started in the fall with Symington on the trail. Then I jumped off and went with Hubert to Alaska and all over the nation. Then I

came back and jumped into all that spring maneuvering and the primaries, West Virginia, all that stuff. But I ended up doing the cover story on Lyndon Johnson in June of 1960, the first one, as we came down toward the nomination.

M: Right before the convention.

S: I went to the Ranch with him for three or four days and got the Ranch treatment and all of that. It was a pretty damned good story, if I do say so myself, pretty straightforward and decent and friendly to Johnson.

But the fact of the matter was that I saw, or felt in my gut, that Kennedy was going to get this thing at that time. So after I did that story on Johnson I just switched over entirely to covering Kennedy, and Johnson was very hurt by that.

M: Not hurt by the story but by the switch.

S: The personal--he considered it kind of a desertion. He thought that I was going to be his man. Oh, he complained to Luce and others about it; to John Steele, the bureau chief, saying, "I knew you thought I was a second-rater when Sidey went over to Kennedy." He was very aware of these little internal rituals. He knew I was the senior correspondent, so when I switched he knew they were downgrading him up in New York. And he was very upset by that.

M: You said a while ago that he never forgot. Do you think he ever forgot that?

S: I think it was the start. I doubt it. I suppose he still remembers that I left him back there and went to Kennedy then.

I was very fond of Kennedy. There isn't any question of that. He was my age and my kind of temperament and mentality, so I liked him.

But I did and do have a great affection for Johnson. I was just fascinated by the man. But I felt also, just out of a journalistic necessity, that Kennedy was going to get it and I'd better be with the winner. So I made the switch and Johnson, God, he brooded and bitched about that.

M: Did you ever talk to him at the convention when he was considering taking the vice presidency?

S: I didn't. I didn't cover him. They split us up in the convention and I was on Kennedy. I was so busy. Only that morning--my suite was right above his in the old Biltmore out there--I remember the only reason I knew what was going on, I came out of my room and I looked down there. And there was a big gathering in the hall down below, Phil Potter of the Baltimore Sun and a lot of these guys. So I went down and said, "What the hell's up?" He said, "Johnson's going to be vice president. He's going to take the vice presidency." I said, "You're out of your mind." He said, "No, Bobby Kennedy's in there." It was all that maneuver. So I quickly got on it and sure as hell, that's what it was. But I hadn't seen him that much.

Then our relationship in the vice presidency was bad. He was so unhappy, and I was so swept up in the president that I never got to see him like in the old days. It was kind of pathetic. I criticize myself, as I look back on that, because here was a man who had been very kind to me, not that he wasn't using me; he was. But we had been close, and I just never seemed to find the time to go up. Then I wrote a couple of kind of unkind things that cut him pretty badly, that really were kind

of uncalled for about, you know, "What happened to Lyndon Johnson?". Again, not that it wasn't very true, because the Kennedy people were, as I look back now, quite ungracious in many of the things they did to him.

M: The Kennedy people, not the Kennedys?

S: Not Jack Kennedy, but the others. Bob Kennedy and Ethel--oh, they used to--God, I was one of the original Hickory Hill gang that was out there, and some of the jokes in that were just awful. I fell out for that reason, not particularly Lyndon Johnson, but just that I couldn't take it for many reasons. It was too rich for my blood. And it was inexcusable, really.

M: It was all the Kennedy aides regularly downgrading him?

S: Not all of them, but many of them did. And ridiculed him, you know. Of course, he was an easy target for it with his accent and his peculiarities. There was no question. But it was inexcusable. In any event, I wasn't. . . .

I remember one time he came down. It was after he had been to Berlin. Kennedy had sent him to Berlin. He had done a hell of a good job.

M: You didn't go with him?

S: No. He was coming through the lobby of the White House. No, part of the problem was, I was just so smothered in the work at the White House. I never got back to the Hill again.

And there was a switch, too, in that time, if you'll note. It went from a congressional-type government to a presidential government. You

see, Lyndon Johnson on the Hill and Sam Rayburn literally ran the country. They were the president and the vice president. Ike didn't know what he was doing down there. He was the great avuncular figure to the nation, and he held them together with his decency and inspired everybody. But, Christ, he didn't run the government. He was indifferent. He didn't care about it. When he'd call Lyndon Johnson down, he'd tell him what he wanted and they'd go up and do it. They ran the country, and all the action was in that Senate. That was the cockpit. Kennedy's labor reform; Stu Symington on the missile gap; and Lyndon Johnson and Hubert--here it was. That's where things were done. They ran the country there, inspired it, gave the ideas, all of it.

It switched. When Kennedy became president, it became a presidential government. The action was downtown. It just died up on the Hill.

I remember Johnson after he'd been to Berlin was going through the White House lobby. He grabbed my hand and said, "Come up and see me." He didn't beg. He just said, "Come on up to see me. I want to see you." So I said, "Well, by God--" And so I did, I went up there. It was like old times. He had that same office then, as vice president. He gave me autographed pictures of him and Adenauer there at Berlin. He told me about him marching down the street; he showed me mail.

M: He was important again.

S: He was important again. It was just a tremendous build-up of him. I went back, and I was deeply touched, really, because I had enjoyed those days. But I didn't have time to do the story, so I got a guy by the

name of Lloyd Miller who had covered Johnson, gone around the world with him when he was vice president--"Go out and do a story on Lyndon Johnson." Well, the story came out "Whatever happened to Lyndon Johnson," again, you know. He was very upset about that, and I was, too. I just thought that was terribly mean and I didn't like it. And my magazine did it.

Then, of course, I didn't have much to do with him until that day in Dallas.

M: That was obviously the next question. How soon after the assassination did you see him?

S: I remember. It was a very curious thing. Peter Lisagor of the Chicago Daily News and I were standing in that parking lot in Fort Worth before we went to Dallas, and I suddenly looked up and here was Johnson standing there. I tapped him on the arm and said, "Hi, Mr. Vice President." He was just very, very cool that morning, shook both our hands and turned away. It wasn't the old Lyndon Johnson. He had been wounded by many things, and I think he considered me part of the enemy, so to speak. And that was it. Then came Dallas.

Then right into the White House. Lyndon Johnson with power then became a totally new man. Oh, my God, it swept up right in again, into that inner circle.

M: He seemed to hold no grudges against you. Time left you on the White House--

S: Yes. John Steele had been a close friend who was bureau chief, and Steele saw him, I think, that first day or that first night.

M: Did he call the press in, like he did so many other groups of people and say, "I need you. Stay on board."?

S: No, not that I'm aware of. But he had Bill White, and he had old friends in, and I think John Steele who had covered him on the Hill for UPI--had him in and talked. There was a little of that. I shouldn't say that. He said, "You know, I'm the only president you've got, and my success is your success. Let's make this work." It was like that. It wasn't quite the staff sort of thing.

Then, you know, he was unable to live with the press and without them as president. Again, he couldn't break his majority leader habits, where he would at 4:00 a.m. after passing a bunch of bills--those fabulous nights when Congress would come to an end, when they'd be up all night, and he'd be majority leader. You'd go in at four o'clock and there he is with his feet on the desk drinking Scotch, counting the box score. The reporters are all gathered around him and he's telling stories and roaring and farting and scratching. It was great! And he couldn't break himself of that.

M: He still tried to do the same thing.

S: Yes, and he just couldn't understand it.

M: Did he still give you the personal contact?

S: Oh, yes. That's what he wanted. He didn't want other people to do it; he wanted to do it. He told you, "Come to me. Call me. You come to me. I'll tell you right." There are all kinds of stories, anecdotes. You've probably heard them. To Charlie Moore, New York Times, he kept saying, "You call me. When you've got questions, you call me." Some

story came up--I used to remember what it was, a foreign policy story--and Charlie Moore was writing it. He thought, "Well, dammit, here's a question. He keeps saying call him." So he called and, of course, got shuttled off to Moyers. He said, "Well, now, dammit,the President told me to call him. I want an answer." Moyers said, "God, he didn't mean it, you know." "Nonsense! If he's going to chew me out next time for not talking to him--" "Well, I'll see what I can do." So several hours later, by George, here's a call from the President. And the first thing Johnson says, "I told you you could talk to me, but not move in with me!" Something like that.

Well, the point of it is, he discovered he would liked to have done it, but he couldn't really. There was a session up there later on in his presidency with a bunch of guys--Lisagor and Potter and other guys--and they had a dinner. And he ended up, he said, "Now, don't you go to Jack Valenti, and don't you go to Bill Moyers and these guys. When you want to know about something, you come to me." He said, "They'll just give you bullshit because they don't know what I'm thinking."

And as they all went out to the elevator and got on the elevator he called Moyers back, and before the elevator door had closed Moyers stuck his head in and said, "I've got to get my new quota of bullshit." Then he went back and talked to the President.

But he wanted that; he wanted to do it. And he did it at first, oh, long interviews.

M: Well, he had a pretty good press at first, too. Was that just the honeymoon effect, or did some particular event later on do away with

with the honeymoon effect?

S: I think it's the nature of the presidency in those early days. It's the idea that you don't really care if a senator from Texas or Iowa or Colorado lies to you in the little things. It doesn't really matter. But when the president of the United States does, it just takes on proportions. . .I couldn't describe it in words, except I felt it, having been with Johnson on the Hill--

M: And it took a while for that to build up, I guess.

S: --and been amused by what went on on the Hill, and fascinated and gratified by it. To come down here--as I say, I couldn't tell you what happened except it's just that built-in reverence of the presidency. I was shocked when he did the same things down here he had up there. When he'd call me in--I had that thing in the book about Dick Goodwin doing his speeches, you know. That sort of thing just stunned me--I didn't know how to write.

M: I guess it took other correspondents longer to realize, or get this feeling, because they didn't have the background.

S: That's right. It took a while. And then the beer can episode down there.

There was another one. He had me to dinner one night down at the Ranch before the beer can [episode], early; it was spring of 1964. He had me at the Ranch, and it was one of those typical dinners. Marianne Means, too, was there, and it was one of those awful, embarrassing evenings around the Ranch table when he wanted Marianne to stay overnight and Lady Bird was there. He was just sore--Johnson was.

He said, "Now you keep out of it, Lady Bird. Just because you don't want me to have a pretty girl around. You're not friendly to me, you don't love me," or something. "I want to have her stay overnight." And I suppose to somebody that wasn't initiated, it would suggest sexual overtones there, and there may have been. Johnson's prowess with the ladies--it's like Kennedy, you know. There's enough circumstantial evidence that convinces me that there were extracurricular activities in and around the office in that regard.

M: For both?

S: For both men, more for Kennedy probably than Johnson. But I was never in the bedroom; I couldn't swear to it or document it. I just have the circumstantial evidence.

But in any event it was one of those embarrassing nights with Marianne Means there, and Vickie McCammon and a lot of secretaries and Johnson and people at the Ranch. It was fascinating. There were the daughters. There was Luci there and Pat Nugent, or one of the boy friends--I don't know. It was before she was married. It was a rollicking discussion and all of that.

Then very shortly thereafter I wrote a critical piece; in fact, it may have been the next week. We had a tough, hard piece about the guy. Well, he complained to other reporters that he couldn't understand a man who would accept the hospitality of the President of the United States and eat at his table and then turn around and kick him in the balls. I don't know how he put it, something like that.

So, you see, here was this very personal relationship violated

again. Whereas in the Senate it probably never would have happened really, because it just wasn't that important. In the presidency everything was magnified a thousand times. In my judgment now--I'm talking about myself-- the need to be scrupulously objective as much as you could, realistic, honest, fair about things, so that I felt that in many ways I bent over backwards to be sympathetic to him, but I just couldn't ignore what was happening. And it was that early! In the first weeks this credibility problem just assailed me like nothing I'd ever seen, and it later grew. Now, of course, Lyndon Johnson says that we did it, we created it.

M: "We" meaning media.

S: The press. We built it up and we caused the problem. But there it was, you know, these little things.

M: How much of his trouble was caused by the conscious effort of the Kennedy loyalists who couldn't make the switch--you know, the Georgetown dinner circuit, this type of thing, particularly in their effect on the media?

S: Some of it there; there isn't any question about it. I don't think ultimately that was the important thing in the credibility problem. But there isn't any question that it was faddish. You get the beautiful people who would gather and imitate Johnson and joke about him. Then, of course, when he did do these things they were magnified by them--when he would deceive people.

M: Some of the media people participated in that regularly, I guess.

S: That's right. Sure you had a hard core then. By that time, luckily,

I was out of it. But you had many people like--you just had really that whole kind of liberal spectrum of reporters and editors and columnists who were part of the Kennedy group. You'd gather them out there, I'd best not name names, but I'm sure you know who there were. Art Buchwald--

M: Sandor Vanocur.

S: Vanocur and David Brinkley, Tony Lewis when he was on the Times, just that whole hard-core bunch.

M: This was a conscious thing.

S: I think much like, to use Agnew's words, the whole kind of intellectual impact area here in the East. I think these people thought they were terribly brilliant and smart and knowledgeable, and what they were doing was right and correct and witty, and all of that. But, yes, it was conscious, it sure was. They thought they had a buffoon at the head of the country, and it would ultimately prove disastrous. And then, of course, the deep, deep, unreasoning resentment over the assassination.

M: How much was Bobby Kennedy involved in this type of thing personally?

S: Oh, his bitterness was there immensely. Bob Kennedy had something in him about Lyndon Johnson that went back to the death. Now I'm practicing psychiatry, but it went back beyond that. It went to the Senate days, it went to the nomination days, and it was deep in there.

He, Bob Kennedy, had contempt for Lyndon Johnson as majority leader. Bobby Kennedy had a theory--and I lean somewhat to it myself--and Sorensen had a theory that Lyndon Johnson was not a majority leader.

There were times when I felt that, that what he was was a man who took advantage of just the right climate in American politics. He was there when Eisenhower, a weak president, was president, and when we needed legislation and the Congress was willing to pass it. Well, since then I've changed my mind back. I think Johnson was far more of a genius than I thought at certain times. But Bobby Kennedy felt that, didn't like him personally, and felt that he'd been screwed in many ways. And again this unreasoning desire to lash out at the man who replaced his brother, which is--I can't blame any of these people. You know the death is such a shock, and what do you do? You're so overwhelmed by the--

M: How did Johnson treat them?

S: I think Johnson's treatment of the Kennedys was impeccable, except where he always destroyed himself in those private hours when he'd begin on personalities; when he'd start to imitate people--Bill Fulbright, a "stud duck," you know; "Little" Bobby Kennedy, the Kennedy "babies," these remarks about them, that sort of thing.

M: Which always got reported to them.

S: Oh, immediately! It went right back. And his contempt and his anger for what they'd done to him as vice president. But when the chips were down, or in public, any time, he was impeccable.

We had a classic example, I think, at the dedication of the Library of the difference between them. Teddy Kennedy did not go to the dedication of the Johnson Library; no member of the Kennedy family went.

M: John Stewart, the director of the Kennedy Library, I guess was probably

the highest ranking Kennedy representative.

S: Lyndon Johnson would never have done that! He christened the ship; he did everything that he could. Now I don't say he didn't harbor any deep resentment. As I say, in those late hours after Scotch or Fresca maybe he was drinking by then--

M: I was going to say, had he gotten to Fresca by then?

S: --it used to bubble out, you know. Then of course the Bobby Kennedy vice presidential incident, you know, followed that where he just cut him down, cut those guys off. But Lyndon Johnson, in my judgment, did everything that he could. And of course I have written that in the transition period he was superb, Johnson was.

M: You've mentioned in books and articles several times that he has called your publisher, for example. Did he really do that more frequently than, say, Kennedy did? I've heard of instances where Kennedy did, too.

S: Oh, yes, but with Kennedy it was rare, very rare, and they were specific problems. And when he got to be president he didn't do it so much. He did it as a candidate. He called up. He raised hell. We were going to have a piece by Billy Graham in Life during the campaign, which literally said, "Nixon's the man," you know. They called Kennedy forty-eight hours before this piece was to appear--they were stricken by their conscience up there--and said, "Well, maybe we ought to let the other candidate have a crack." Kennedy was outraged. He called Luce and just raised holy hell, and they changed, by God! Billy Graham redid the piece, and it was a call for decency and

motherhood and all of that; it was not an endorsement of Nixon. That happened in the campaign. But I am not aware that John Kennedy called my editors or publishers after he became president. I think perhaps what happened was he bitched. Luce would come to see him and he'd complain to Luce in the office. But it wasn't the case of calling.

M: So Johnson was a change, then?

S: Yes. Johnson reached out. Of course, he had more friends as publishers that he had known before. He had better contacts.

M: Did he usually call publishers rather than reporters?

S: I believe so. Again, he used to play at it. He'd have Phil Potter in, and while Phil was there he'd call up the publisher of the Baltimore Sun and say, "Hey, I've got the greatest reporter in the world right here." My suspicion is that he did that far less than he is thought to have done it; that he may have half a dozen or a dozen times called the publishers around. In his later years, as near as I can tell, he really didn't. He'd given that up.

M: How about the credibility problem in general? Was it a whole lot worse under Johnson than it was under Kennedy, or previous presidents, for that matter?

S: Yes. It wasn't at first, but it really did get worse, yes. It was a real problem. It wasn't only little things. That started it, of course--the driving, the drinking, the denials, and the little bitty things. Telling the press down there on that New Year's Eve, 1964--the budget, "Couldn't get it under a hundred billion, never make it." These little games that he played with the press started there, but then

it got into big things. It got into the phony budget and Vietnam.

M: That's how it changed from earlier presidents?

S: Sure. I think Vietnam--again, the cancer. And I really think that Lyndon Johnson thought that he could get into that war and out without the people knowing about it. I think that's what finally did him in.

Then the believability factor became very great, and it wasn't really. If you list a number of cases where he actually either lied to the people or deceived them, there wouldn't be that many. You'd probably be surprised at how few. The credibility arose--and I think perhaps I discussed this somewhat in the book--in other ways, in hyperbole, over-exaggeration, too much emphasis on things, too much gimmickry.

M: How much of that was the fault of his staff? Was he badly served by his numerous press secretaries, or well served?

S: No, I think that was him. He was just a flamboyant man. You know, when you announced a rail settlement, you gathered everybody up and you roared up the street. You did that when you nominated Hubert Humphrey. You walked on the back lawn for hours, and then you swept up in the helicopter. You went around the world to see the Pope. It was just so outlandish and so huge that it never could live up to its expectations. They always kind of fell then, and then there was a hollow feeling and people felt they had been deceived. Glassboro, you know--suddenly the meeting with Kosygin. And then as I say, around the world and swooping down on the Pope on Christmas Eve with helicopters.

What did it mean? Nothing came of it. Not that it wasn't sincere, but it was just his style as much as anything that got in his way.

I remember that great lunch that some of us had with him in the Dominican Republic after he'd dispatched the Marines. Before they got the spigot turned off, there were twenty-four thousand troops ashore. The first criticism in foreign policy. You know, everybody bitched about it.

M: That's where Fulbright broke.

S: Yes. And he was upset because of that criticism. He had some magazine reporters there--Jack Sutherland of the U.S. News, Chuck Roberts of Newsweek, and myself, I guess he maybe had only those three. We went over to have lunch with him. The ritual started at one, and he was late. We got out of there about five-thirty. He had spent that whole afternoon pacing back and forth in that little dining room down below, going over this story of how Admiral [William F.] Raborn, who had just been appointed that same day or something head of the CIA, had told him he thought they ought to get the troops in. Ambassador [W. Tapley] Bennett was down there underneath the desk with bullets whizzing in, and the Americans. . . and he had to do it. He had to force us to believe this story. It was just like if he talked enough and long enough that he'd get it in here. He went over and over and over this damned thing all afternoon!

Well, that's a credibility problem--it is, you see, with us because--

M: It's more than that, too.

S: Yes, it's more than that, but those were also a part of the seeds of the credibility problem. It was so overdone, again the reaction was

overdone, that it left us in great doubt about many elements: his leadership, his stability in these moments. That was a very, very intrinsic part of the credibility problem in my opinion.

M: This is kind of a subjective question, but as a presidential correspondent for over ten years, how much of the real story of the presidential activity gets reported?

S: We had a classic example in the Pentagon Papers. I think that's a shabby episode in journalism. I really do. Furthermore, I think those papers are bad, flawed almost beyond use in some cases and the Times added their axe to grind in there that changed it.

I have often said in the past there are five layers of government, and we penetrate with some regularity one layer; occasionally the second layer; and even, with luck, get into the third layer; but those last two we hardly ever see.

M: That's what we're trying to do with this kind of a project. That's one of the reasons I asked.

S: That's right. We hardly ever--and the Pentagon Papers proved that again. Because, goddammit it, the fourth and fifth layers are not there!

M: They're about the third layer.

S: That's right. The fourth layer is the Tuesday Lunch, and the fifth layer is Lyndon Johnson's mind. And nobody was there.

Now Lyndon Johnson--we had, in a strange way, a better [perspective], because he'd draw you in. But even then, hell's bells, we weren't in those moments when he made those decisions, when he talked about the issues. We were there when he attempted to justify them, when he attempted to explain them. But the atmosphere had changed.

M: The Pentagon Papers raise a couple of points. You have written a couple of things. One, that Johnson was sincere in his campaign statements about the Vietnam process at that time. Do you still believe that to have been the case?

S: I believe absolutely that. In other words, I think Johnson tried to obscure the severity of the problem over there, but there is no doubt in my mind whatsoever that he wanted to do everything he could to avoid real involvement in that war.

The suggestion that comes out in those papers that Lyndon Johnson was kind of a man who wanted war, a venal man who wanted to get in there and fight and bomb for whatever reasons--nobody explains that. But the suggestion is that he really encouraged it, you know. That is just so much nonsense, it is just so far from the truth. Lyndon Johnson, who had been distrustful of admirals and generals all his life, whose greatest desire was to have a presidency in the image of Franklin Roosevelt, to build houses and dams and power and to ease the lives of people, that he wanted to dissipate this country--oh, it's just preposterous! That's the thing I really criticize the Times for and the Pentagon Papers.

M: You've also written that McNamara's departure was self-chosen, in the light of his Vietnam change of pace that allegedly took place according to the Pentagon Papers. Do you think that he was voluntarily taken out?

S: I think that's one of those coincidences like the departure of Bill Moyers, where both men come to kind of an understanding there. Both men had reached a point of disenchantment. It just kind of happens,

and then it surprises both of them. But perhaps the guy that gets kicked out, it surprises him most.

M: Not exactly being fired, but--?

S: Not exactly being fired. Again, here's one of those layers of government we haven't penetrated and McNamara has not written about it. But every bit of evidence that I can get is that McNamara had offered his objections in that, and that Lyndon Johnson had become disenchanted and that there was no effort to fire McNamara. But after that second or third go-round in which he finally said, "I better resign," he was startled when Lyndon Johnson said, "Okay." I think that happened to Bill Moyers.

M: There was no more than that to the Moyers story which, of course, was more personal?

S: I don't think so. I think Bill had in those periods said, "I've got a lot of these offers and I'd better go." Up until that point every time Johnson had said, "You can't leave me. My God, I need you." Had turned on the persuasive powers. Then suddenly that one day Lyndon Johnson said, "Okay." Nobody was more shocked than Moyers by the acceptance of it. I think the same with McNamara, if we ever get to the bottom of it.

I could be wrong, but I don't believe that Lyndon Johnson in either case said, "You're fired. I want you out of here." I think it was just one of those events in government that almost is stranger than fiction. Well, no, they aren't, they're just a matter of human relationships and they happen very frequently. Just two intelligent,

highly strong-willed men, and they come to an understanding. But they're both reluctant. Neither wants to do this, and then all of a sudden there was that little catalyst, that opportunity, and the President of the United States says, "Okay." It's a shock to everybody.

M: Probably both, really.

S: Yes, but it happens.

M: You wrote almost immediately and very intimately about Johnson's process of withdrawing. Was all that common knowledge among the correspondents in the White House, or did you have some special insight into that?

S: No, you could just sense it. It's almost overnight, you know. Well, it's not overnight, but certain events--it was just turned on, and particularly those last years. I don't recall precisely when, but it was when Vietnam grew bitter and his polls went way down and the whole business began to be a credibility problem.

M: He talked frequently about stopping. Did anybody believe him in the press corps?

S: Yes. But, you see, Lyndon Johnson was incapable of total withdrawal. He had to get out, he still traveled, you know, and he still did these things. But there isn't any question that he just didn't talk to reporters. Although, you know, there were still the old habits. The night that he withdrew--remember that Sunday night or whenever it was when he announced it--he had that big session up in the Oval Room, the gold Oval Room, with fifty reporters around him, explaining how he'd done it, like the old majority leader days. So it was still in him, you see.

But there was a distinct and definite "To hell with it" cutoff.

M: How about the role of Lady Bird not only in that, but generally speaking?

S: I wish I understood that more. I think that's such an intimate thing that only those people can write about it. I don't believe Lady Bird is candid about it. She only tells a tiny fraction, that's all. That's the problem with all people. That's the problem with the history of Lyndon Johnson! I almost--and I'm going to one of these weeks--write the story about the papers that aren't in the Library. Because the people that were close and loved Lyndon Johnson very much won't write honestly about him. Liz Carpenter and those people, and Jack Valenti and those people are just hopeless.

The people who were his enemies won't write honestly either. They're too emotional about it. They go too far; they're struck by him, you know. Theirs is distorted. You can't take it. It's too bitter a story.

Some place, I hope to God, is that person in the middle. I don't know. And maybe you guys are the ones--

M: We're trying.

S: --that weren't up that close to it who could show one of the amazing figures in history and delineate what he did for this country which was immense but also show the tragedy, because there was one. The flawed personality, and what happened there.

And Lady Bird fits in this category. You see, she can't write openly and completely about it. If she could, oh, God, it would be marvelous. Her book is great and warm and friendly, but it isn't candid. And Liz Carpenter's is worthless really, in evaluating. A pleasant book but worthless in evaluating this man. All of it comes down to that.

I don't know about Ronnie Dugger. It's odd that Lyndon Johnson kind of opened up to him in the end. He gave him time, and I don't know if Ronnie Dugger as this point could be. . . . But the people who were confirmed enemies and battling in those times can't do it either. They're just as wrong as the other people. Some place there should come that balanced look at the man.

M: That's why we're trying to get fifteen hundred people on this kind of taping thing. Maybe twenty years from now when all of them are available, it will be possible to put it together.

What was his reaction to your book?

S: I never, never heard. He didn't say one word. I got the private little calls from his people saying, "That's a great book. You really got the guy. You are kind to him where you should be, and you give him hell. . . ." Virtually all of the intelligent people around Johnson, I really thought, said, "I like that." It wasn't a great book or a complete book; it was these little vignettes.

M: It wasn't supposed to be a complete book.

S: Yes, that's right. And they liked it. They said, "He has read parts of it." But there was never any comment, never any.

Now I think he was very upset. One time he said something about keeping stuff off the record that's supposed to be off the record. I think he had the book in mind; that I'd printed things that he'd talked to me in private about. Well, he may have had a little bit of a point there, but not really much. The problem with Johnson, and he never probably really understood this, was that he would call you in and he'd

say, "It's off the record." Well, in the first place, he didn't mean it was off the record. His idea of off the record--

M: He wouldn't have called you in if he didn't want something reported.

S: He wanted it printed. So, all right. That's the first place. But then, secondly, there were sixteen other guys lined up outside and he told them the same thing. By six o'clock that evening all over town these stories were in the public domain essentially. I'd go out and I'd say, "Have you heard Johnson's latest," and "Here's what he says." By the time you get through sixteen correspondents, these stories, the guy down there doesn't consider it off the record so it's printed. This inevitably happened to Johnson. When he'd cut up Fulbright or Ayub Khan or somebody, Shastri--you remember when he cancelled the visits to India and he had this incredible session on the back lawn. It ran through half a dozen correspondents and then it was put on the record, put on the wire. They just considered it on the record. You can't, once it's out like this. . . . Johnson either never understood or never wanted to understand that system.

So, my book, I went through all of it. Virtually all of this stuff was known around town. There wasn't anything there that could any longer be called sensitive or off the record, so that's why I printed it.

M: He didn't cut you out or anything after its publication?

S: No, he just never mentioned it, not once.

M: It was a silent subject.

S: I think once he told John Scalli, "Sidey's that shit that writes books." And that was about it. But he never said anything more than that.

M: There's a whole range of things that you undoubtedly have anecdotes

about that we'd be happy to have, things like his travels, particularly his around-the-world trip.

S: Do you see those two blue books? Those are memos from conversations with Johnson, private conversations.

M: Are they going to be preserved somewhere where somebody will get a chance to get to them?

S: Well, yes. I don't know what I'm going to do with them. Again, I'm going to mine them sometime. I'm going to do that piece for Life sometime about papers that aren't in the Library yet.

M: You might combine it with a piece on the general process of the oral collection of these things because there are now a thousand interviews on Johnson, about that many on Kennedy, there's already a Nixon project being planned. It has gotten to be a pretty big operation.

S: It's a good operation, a very good operation.

M: But by all means don't destroy them. Let them somehow get into the public domain at some future time.

(Interruption)

I've exhausted the list of specific things that I wanted to mention, but don't let that cut you off. If there are particularly revealing episodes on his travels or at the Ranch or anything--

S: You know we could go on forever. I could be honest with you and someday it might be wise for us to have another session, someday when I would sit down and really prepare for it, when I would go through these and go back over my--I must have two or three million words that I have written on those five years with Johnson.

M: Do you plan to write anymore as far as books are concerned?

S: I don't know. When we file to New York, our system is excellent for keeping records because we don't write finished stories in Time, we write research.

M: There are "XX trees in Egypt," or--

S: Yes. And the point of it is that inevitably we file a small novel every week because they want everything. So that in the process of covering Johnson I wrote just reams and reams, only a fraction of which was used in Time magazine. I have in my home--

M: Do you file off-the-record things as a rule?

S: Oh yes, memos and unattributable quotes, and all of that. And color, just events which frequently are lost, like Johnson around-the-world, what he looked like, said, did; stories of him as he went.

M: Was he as bad a personal ambassador as some of the characterizations of him suggest?

S: In certain instances, but he was superb in others. In Australia, down there after Harold Holt's funeral, my God, they loved him!

M: What was the difference?

S: He was kind of a monolith, insensitive sometimes, didn't give a damn sometimes, trampled over people. You know that story on flying on Air Force One with Holyoke, the prime minister of New Zealand, and Holt, [his] saying, "I always like to come out and see my prime ministers." It was just Lyndon Johnson, dammit.

M: Which he didn't mean in a derogatory way probably.

S: No, that's him! But the point of it was it was picked up and it horrified

a lot of people, and it was used then against the man.

M: But he really was capable of a rebel yell in the Taj Mahal and having Cutty Sark flown in from Japan.

S: Sure. There were a lot of things that bothered people, but on the other hand, as I say, in Australia a big guy going down the street shaking hands with people--they loved him in some of those places. The same in Korea, they loved him. A great fascination with him.

But it varied. When he went to Adenauer's funeral and to see De Gaulle, it was a sullen and very unproductive meeting.

But my records at home, I have just stacked up millions of words, really, on the guy. Sometime it might be worthwhile, if you're still interested, if the pace ever slows here, for me to go back over these things. And if there are gaps along the way, that's really kind of the thing--specific instances, you know. For instance, that four and a half days around the world is just so rich in Johnson flavor and outlook: four and a half days on these airplanes; one night on the ground in a bed; Lyndon Johnson with his exercise bicycle back there on Air Force One; and no windows, those damned curtains over the windows, flying around the world. And that story of him, who had sent a mission secretly to Rome to arrange that meeting with the Pope so that the Italian government wouldn't know, and that advance troop staying in a hotel, not telling the Ambassador. That whole story is so incredible. And Jack Valenti on there phoning and cabling, trying to get to Joe Laitin who is in Rome, and Joe won't talk to the Ambassador. The White House switchboard didn't realize that they weren't supposed to call the Ambassador, so that in

the search for Joe Laitin and the advance party, they awoke Freddie Reinhardt every half hour on the hour all through the night. So by five in the morning Reinhardt knew he was being screwed, something was up. The Italian government got wind of it. They got sore. The Vatican said, "Unless you talk to the Italian government, we can't do it." Nobody would talk. Three hours out of Rome, still no meeting arranged. Then the helicopters didn't get there.

M: Meanwhile CBS was airing the story or something. Hadn't they figured it out from some--

S: Johnson on Air Force One, again denying that he was going to go to Rome, telling all us guys that he was going to Rome. It was just incredible! It was just unbelievable! Again, a noble instinct in Johnson--he wanted the Pope to go talk about the prisoners. It couldn't have come from finer instincts. But it was devised in that typical Johnsonian fashion, and it was just unbelievable, ending in Christmas Eve up there in the Vatican in the private quarters with Johnson pulling out this bust of himself and handing it to the Pope!

M: That must have been some conversation!

S: It really was. That's the kind of thing where in writing a full and juicy kind of history, if you come on an incident like that, if it means anything, then I could be of immense help because I've got files and color.

M: Has anybody ever asked you to put that in the Johnson Library?

S: No. I've got it up there on my bulletin board, a request from Yale to put my papers in the Yale Library and in my old alma mater of Iowa State.

M: That's right, you are--I'm associate dean of Kansas State, in my regular job.

S: I see. Iowa State College.

But there's a certain presumption that the papers are worth a damn. To be honest with you, that's the first thing that I haven't hurdled.

M: Don't tell a historian that they're not. They are!

S: I know, but they're flawed like all journalism. But there is a value, I see that, in that it's my impression on the spot. That's the thing. It gives the flavor. We may be totally wrong about what happened, but it gives the sense of things surrounding events at the moment.

M: It will be easier to tell twenty years from now whether you were right or wrong than you might think, too.

S: Yes. But I haven't decided what to do with them. Then, of course, they changed the law where you don't get any tax advantage out of it. You made a little dough the other way; you got a little write-off. Somebody said they were going to get that changed back.

M: They're trying to do that because the museums and libraries and things are just very unhappy about this change.

There's some advantage you might think of in terms of putting them in presidential libraries.

S: Yes, I agree on that.

M: Whether it's the Kennedy one or the Johnson one or the Nixon one, or whatever you pick.

S: I agree on that. When you have an isolated little group of papers at Ames, Iowa, nobody gives a damn.

M: Some of the older presidential libraries, like the Eisenhower one, suffer from that problem. Who wants to go to Abilene, Kansas to do research?

Or West Branch, Iowa?

S: I realize that. You might sometime--maybe you've already done this. When we went down for the Library dedication, we correspondents who had traveled with Johnson, of course, got together at night. Sid Davis of Westinghouse was a favorite of Johnson's, Peter Lisagor, myself, Chuck Roberts of Newsweek, Bob Pierpont of CBS. And we got to telling stories again. Carroll Kilpatrick of the Washington Post. And these were incredible sessions, because we forget these anecdotes and then we remind each other. By the end of the evening, they're just pouring out from everybody who was on an airplane!

M: It would be great to tape a session like that.

S: Yes, to tape a session like that--you might consider that sometime.

M: Group sessions are hard to tape, but--

S: Yes. Sid and I were on the airplane when he flew either from New York to Pittsburgh during the campaign, when he delivered himself of his harshest denunciation of the Vietnam War, which becomes very pertinent now, when he said, "I'm not about to send American boys over there. When one little old general in shirt-sleeves can come down those trails and take Saigon, do you think I'm going to have American boys go in there and fight those wars? Twenty-two million Chinese sitting up there ready to come in."

This can bear on this question now, the Pentagon Papers, immensely. But Sid and I were on that flight. And in there there's a memo someplace written after that flight when he really let loose.

These guys, you know, range from the ridiculous to the marvelous.

Carroll Kirkpatrick one night reminded me of the story--I've forgotten when--when he asked him what the issues of the campaign were. I guess I do have that in my book, where he said, "There are only three things people care about: everybody cares about war and peace; men worry about heart attacks; and women worry about cancer of the tit."

M: That's right. I remember that story.

S: It's just beautiful. But there are a million of those things that these guys--

M: But, you know, to get further than an inch deep into Lyndon Johnson that's the kind of thing you need. Because if his enemies and his friends are unwilling to really unload as, at least in print, most of them seem to be, the only way you can flesh him out is with that specific kind of thing.

S: And you get into his opinions of De Gaulle, his opinions of Fulbright, the difficulty back there--Hubert, you know. One time Pete Lisagor was over there and he said, "If Hubert would just shut up"--talking about his Vice President--"All he needs over there is a cedar pencil and a girl to answer the phone. He has got eleven secretaries. What's he do with them?" This sort of business.

M: He knew. He'd been there. The Fulbright one is a real strange one because they were really apparently close friends. I've lived most of my life in Arkansas. Gosh, I think Betty Fulbright used to buy Lady Bird Christmas presents and things like that, for example. And there's just no communication now.

S: You're right. Then later when he would call Fulbright down, he'd try to seduce him. Suddenly Fulbright would be asked to a Rose Garden ceremony

and the photographers would click pictures of them together, and the pictures would go out to the papers. Then he'd call him in, and Fulbright would go in and he'd say, "Now what's on your mind?" Fulbright would ask one question and Johnson would talk to him for an hour.

M: Talk to him, not with him?

S: Yes, not with him. And Fulbright would say, "Jesus Christ!" He'd go back madder than ever. Yes, it's a strange and unusual relationship, how that developed and how they fell out.

M: I would certainly like to have a session sometime when it's possible for you to do so. Would you like us to wait six months and give you a call?

S: Yes, I think this is a bad time. It would be much better in the winter when the boys are around and Nixon isn't traveling.

M: This turned out to be a big news week.

S: Yes, but a bull session with some of these fellows--it's as I say just like unravelling a sweater. Some guy pulls one, "Oh, gosh, I'd forgotten that." "I remember that."

And one of the guys with the greatest memory of all is Lisagor. He is probably the brightest man in this business that I know, and he has an encyclopedic memory--every fragment is kind of tucked away. Once you get him going and remember events--

M: Probably ought to have one of these sessions over several of the Scotches that Johnson used to use.

S: That's right. Lisagor had really kind of the last session a reporter

had with Lyndon Johnson. He'd cut everybody off, but he liked Pete very much. He liked his sense of humor, and they got along. He thought he was an honorable and decent guy even though he criticized him. He had him in, and they had three hours, I think. It was after the Democratic convention that had nominated Hubert and Muskie. Old Lyndon let it go, you know. telling big whopping lies and exaggerating, but also, as he could do, just put his finger on the truth.

It's a hilarious description that Peter tells about Salinger. Johnson talking, he called him "Peer," you know--"Peer Salinger, old Peer." Johnson said, "I've never seen anything like this in my life. That television--here's, I forget, John Chancellor or somebody trying to explain about Hubert Humphrey and Lyndon Johnson, what he's doing, you know, trying to tell them. Suddenly NBC would interrupt and say, 'Just a minute, we have Sandy Vanocur down with the California delegation.' So they flashed down. Here is Sandy Vanocur standing there with Shirley MacLaine and some big nigger down there. This is old Rafer Johnson. She's saying, 'Teddy Kennedy's going to get it, we're all for Teddy Kennedy,' and they go on for fifteen minutes. And then they'd go back to John Chancellor and he'd start to explain about 'Now Hubert Humphrey's--' 'Just a minute! Sandy Vanocur's back!'" Johnson is just hilarious, how he tells it. Then he'd say, "There's old Peer Salinger. Whoever elected him to anything! Peer Salinger with his bangs." Lisagor would say, "You mean sideburns, don't you?" "No, no. Bangs, bangs! Standing up there saying we can't win with Humphrey!"

But it's Lyndon Johnson watching the television down at the Ranch

during that critical time in the convention. It's his account of it.

So these guys, as I say, have a lot of lore that tells about that personality. My judgment is that in some instances they'll tell it better than some of the guys within the White House that were up close and either afraid or guys who just aren't trained in that recollection process. So that might be worthwhile for you sometime.

M: We certainly appreciate your making this much time available.

S: Oh, hell, I'm delighted. I just got a letter from Walt Rostow yesterday morning. I did a piece on Dean Rusk in this week's Life, and oh, God, he was overwhelmed with joy about this.

But I've got to get down there. You see, I want to tape one of these instances out of the Pentagon Papers, like that fall of 1964. I'm trying to get Walt or somebody to go through the records. I don't want any secret records, but to detail as best I can what these guys said and thought about it because I think it was just the opposite of what those damned papers suggest.

M: I don't know how many of our things are open, that have been returned without restrictions or even at what stage those that have been so returned are.

S: Well, there's the official record that I could get--in other words, George Christian's briefings in that period; what NSC meetings were held and who attended. I know the minutes of those things aren't open, but I should be able to get the factual things. Then I might be able to go back over and get the guys who were there and try to get them to talk about it.

M: Ball and Bill Bundy and--

S: To talk about it. And Walt says there are minutes, but he says he can't release them, you just can't do it. And I said, "Well, Walt, can't you read them yourself to just jog your memory--" Because he wasn't there in 1964.

M: He wasn't there is the problem. Mac Bundy was there.

S: --"and then, without getting into classified material, just tell what people thought." We've already done a little bit.

M: It would be a useful piece.

S: I'd just like to zing them. I'd just like to go in there and say, "Now, look, here's one major conclusion. The suggestion is that these men were venal, that they were scheming for war, eagerly planning war while talking peace. That I don't believe. Here is the consensus. On this date, at this meeting, to the best of the memory of the men around, General Taylor said he didn't want to bomb." Or "So-and-so said that we should begin to plan in case this thing got out of hand, but hope to God that it didn't." Or that Lyndon Johnson wasn't even at the meeting.

M: Which is likely.

S: Which could very well be because the dates are confused. Walt has gone into the records and said the date he was was September 9 instead of 7. So what was on the 7th? Was that one of those lesser planning meetings?

M: It may have been that or it may have been a contingency plan dated that date and not a meeting at all.

S: Or they didn't even have a meeting at all.

M: I've talked to most of these people and am now engaged in trying to get the project to let us go back with some specific dates and things of this nature and say, "Look at your records and then we are going to talk about this one episode." We might ultimately get some of this.

But I hope you will be able to do a piece because from what I know your reaction is the correct one.

S: Yes. I just think that it gives absolutely the wrong thing. It's just a terrible error.

M: We'll try to set up something in the future and maybe go into some of these [things].

S: Yes.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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