

INTERVIEW I

DATE: July 5, 1983

INTERVIEWEE: JOHN V. SINGLETON, JR.

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Judge Singleton's office, United States Courthouse,
Houston, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: Let's start out, Judge Singleton, with your initial contact with the Lyndon Johnson campaign. I believe you indicated you were at the University of Texas at the time.

S: Right. I was in summer school in 1941 and John Connally was managing Johnson's campaign for [the Senate]. I believe it was Senator Morris Sheppard had died. They had a special election to fill the vacancy and Johnson announced and W. Lee O'Daniel, who was then governor of Texas, announced, and they had a race for it. The Johnson campaign headquarters were at the Stephen F. Austin Hotel in Austin. John interested me in working in the campaign.

G: Did you know John Connally through student politics?

S: Yes. The relationship between John and me is an interesting one. I dated Nellie. I was pinned to Nellie for about three years, and John took her away from me. At that time it was a very bitter feeling. Over the years we got to be very close friends. But at that moment of time it was sort of a bitter feeling I think.

Interestingly enough, as you know, John was president of the student body. He and Jake Pickle were leaders of the independents. I

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was a fraternity man. In 1939 my fraternity brother Tom Law had run for president of the student body against Connally, and Connally beat him. Connally and Pickle and I were friends, particularly I think Pickle, because my relationship with John was [as] a co-rival for Nellie. In any event, they told me if I could get the fraternity clique nomination for president that they would support me. This has been a story that's told and retold every time we get together. And so I did. It was unheard of that two candidates back to back from the same fraternity would get the clique nomination, but they decided to support me and so I ran. I always contend that Connally and Pickle double-crossed me--they say they didn't, but I contend they did--and they put up Sydney Reagan for president of the student body, the independents did. John and Jake deny having any part in that whatsoever.

But in any event, Sydney was a nice fellow, but a rather nondescript individual, not much color. So we had a very bitter campaign, as I recall it. Of course the records will speak for themselves. Sydney only beat me by less than three hundred votes out of two or three thousand that were cast, and so I was defeated by Sydney. I've always accused Connally and Pickle of double-crossing me. So that was my background with Connally.

Well, then Connally and Nellie were married by the time the 1941 campaign had come about, and so John got me interested in the campaign. I had never met Congressman Johnson.

G: Do you have any idea what the University of Texas student attitude toward LBJ was about that time?

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S: I would say that if an election had been held on the campus, Johnson would not have won.

G: Really? Why was that?

S: The campus at that time was basically conservative. I'm talking about the majority of the people. Now, of course the independents who you would traditionally think would be liberal people, they weren't all liberal. John was a big independent; John was never liberal. Joe Kilgore was never liberal. Pickle was really never liberal. It had the aura of so-called political liberalism about it, but it really wasn't. Pickle is the man who organized the independents at the University of Texas before I got there. The politics at the University were controlled by the fraternities up until Pickle organized the independents and ran Jimmy Brinkley [?] for president of the student body in 1935 if I'm not mistaken, and he won. From then on during my entire time at the University, up until World War II, the fraternities never won the presidency. The only thing they won were what the independents gave us. The independents never challenged the editorship of the Cactus, for example, because that was not a magazine but sort of a social thing. They didn't want anything to do with it, so they always gave us the editorship of the Cactus. The contest was the president of the student body and the editorship of the Daily Texan, and they won it every time.

But that's just background. I then worked in the summer of 1941, started out driving a sound truck I remember, and then got up into the echelon of the organization. I became sort of Jim Blundell's assistant.

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G: You indicated that he worked with finances.

S: I think he did. If my memory is correct, he was the finance chairman I believe of the campaign. But all my work was in and around Austin and in the headquarters at the Stephen F. Austin. Then after the election my job was to chart the voting patterns because, as everyone knows, the Texas Election Bureau on Sunday morning declared Johnson the new United States senator from Texas. I think he was ahead by some five thousand some odd votes I believe.

(Interruption)

G: The 1941 [campaign].

S: Right. My job was to tabulate the voting patterns. What had happened, I was told--I didn't actually see it I don't believe, I may have seen it--that we had intercepted a telegram from Coke Stevenson, who was W. Lee O'Daniel's campaign manager, that went out Sunday to various key county men in East Texas, certain key counties--I can't remember the names of the counties, for some reason Brown County sticks out in my mind, I'm not sure that's accurate--to hold up counting the votes until further notice from W. Lee O'Daniel's campaign headquarters. Surprisingly enough, the voting trends in those counties showed a very interesting and surprising change beginning Monday morning. You might remember that it wasn't until Wednesday, if my memory is correct, that the election was finally decided, and I believe we lost by 1311 votes. The tabulations that I did in those counties where this telegram was sent was most surprising and most significant because the voting trends just changed dramatically in

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those counties. As a result of that I know that there was a meeting and I was in attendance in which the discussion was related to whether or not Mr. Johnson should challenge the election. He decided not to because, as he stated--I'm not trying to quote him exactly, but he was young and he had a long time to go and there are many other campaigns to fight.

G: Did he feel that there would be some negative reaction to him if he did challenge it?

S: Yes. I think he felt that if he challenged and lost, his political future insofar as statewide future was concerned would be practically nil. Then of course I don't know this, but I would guess that he also was thinking even if he won, the win would be tarnished somewhat.

G: Where was this meeting held, do you remember?

S: My recollection was it was on the top floor of the Stephen F. Austin Hotel.

G: Do you know who else was there?

S: I know John was there. I know Pickle was there. I know Blundell was there.

G: Was [Alvin] Wirtz there?

S: I think Senator Wirtz was there. Oh, my goodness, there were a lot of people there. My recollection is it was a big meeting. There was a suite on the top of the Stephen F. Austin Hotel that was the campaign headquarters.

G: Did any of his advisers counsel him to challenge that election?

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S: I think so. I don't remember who, but I think there was considerable consensus of opinion, at least my recollection is, that there was a considerable consensus to challenge.

G: Well, the indication is that a lot of the areas where Martin Dies had strength had voted heavily for O'Daniel, and that perhaps Jim Ferguson had switched the votes that he controlled from Dies to O'Daniel.

S: I do remember that Martin Dies was not for Johnson.

G: But he was a candidate in the race.

S: And he was a candidate in the race, of course. When it got to a run-off between Johnson and W. Lee O'Daniel, Dies was for W. Lee O'Daniel. I believe I'm correct that the telegram that I referred to went out basically to the East Texas counties. That was a special election; there wasn't a run-off. But in any event Dies was not one of the top candidates, and I do know that Dies was not a friend of then-Congressman Johnson.

G: Of course Gerald Mann was also in the race.

S: Right. He was in the race.

G: Do you think that he drew a number of votes from LBJ?

S: I think so, yes.

G: Were there any efforts to get Mann out of the race?

S: I do not know. At that time I was what I would describe as a gofer. I was not a part of any policy-making team; I was just around.

G: You mention that you did work with Blundell. Let me ask you about the finances. Did the campaign seem to have adequate financing?

S: Yes, it did to me.

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G: It did?

S: I think it did have adequate financing.

G: Do you have any idea how much was spent in that race?

S: No. To me it was a lot of money, being a youngster, senior at the University. It was a lot of money. There was a lot of money spent in the campaign.

G: Well, you know, Mann used the argument that Johnson was spending so much money he was in essence buying the [election].

S: I remember that charge being made quite publicly, because Johnson was well financed.

G: Anything else on the financial aspects of the campaign that you remember?

S: As I said, I certainly was not in on any policy-making decisions. I was not a part of the policy-making team. I was more of a gofer. Blundell did--I did handle money from time to time to take various places. I'd take cash to various places. Where it came from and how much it was I do not know.

G: The 1941--

(Interruption)

I was going to ask you about the fact that Johnson's votes seemed to come out very early in that race as the counties where he did have strong organizations and good majorities seemed to report early. Did this influence the way he reported later on? Did he tend to keep his votes back rather than reporting early? Do you think they felt that there was a mistake in reporting early?

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S: I do not know. I'd never been asked that question. It never had been. . . . My recollection is that Johnson's strength was mainly in the larger cities and of course they do report earlier than the out-lying counties, particularly at that time. At that time of course they didn't have any electronic voting machines. It was all by paper ballot. And there was a big field in the race. I forget how many candidates were in the race, but there were, it seemed like to me, ten or eleven.

G: [There] may have been minor [candidates]. Yes.

Now let me ask you about going to work for LBJ. You went to work for him in early 1942, is that right?

S: Yes. Interestingly enough, Pearl Harbor day, that Saturday, we had a get-together at the LCRA guest house on Lake Buchanan. John and Nellie were there; Jake and Sugar Crites, his wife, were there; Homer Thornberry was there I believe; Price Daniel was there, if I'm not mistaken. If I'm not mistaken I rode up with Price. I think Kilgore was there. Anyway, we were all there. Texas had just beat Oregon 77 to 7. That was the great 1941 football team at Texas. We'd all gone to the game, and then we went up to the LCRA guest house to spend the night. We were all throwing a football around Sunday morning when Nellie and the other women came running out saying that the Japs had bombed Pearl Harbor. We all went into the guest house to listen to the radio about bombing Pearl Harbor.

I had tried to get into the navy before, because my draft number was so low, but I had been rejected. I wanted to go into the navy air

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corps, but I had been rejected because I had an overbite! That's how strict the navy was at that time. But on January 10, 1942 I went down and enlisted in the V-7 program, which was the ninety-day wonder program, and was accepted and sworn in on January 10, 1942 into the navy, but they didn't have a school open at that time and I had to wait. I subsequently went to Abbott [?] Hall at Northwestern University in Chicago. Johnson needed some help in Washington, so I went to Washington I forget when. It seems like to me it was in March.

G: How did you know that he needed help?

S: Somebody contacted me. Whether it was John or--somebody said that if I could come up there, they'd get me a job as a Capitol policeman and I'd be a Capitol policeman at night or whenever it was and Sunday afternoons, and then I'd work in Johnson's office the rest of the time, which I did. I went up there and I lived at the Dodge Hotel in the basement with Pickle. We had a little old room. We had to stoop down under the heat pipes to get into this little room that we stayed in at the old Dodge Hotel. Very interesting time.

That's when my image with Johnson I think was permanently tarnished because of the files incident. It's an interesting story. I was working there in the office, and the files were in terrible shape. So I took it on myself to reorganize the files. This particular time I had some part of the files, whether it was M through Z, or A through B, or whatever that I was working on, and I had worked till about twelve o'clock at night on them and I had them on the floor. I got tired and decided I'd go on home. I had to be back down there by six-thirty

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because Johnson would always call about seven-thirty and somebody had to have read the mail, separated it out among just regular mail, special correspondence, friends, and be able to tell him over the telephone what the mail was. And Johnson was there at that time. I left the files between two chairs on the floor, and I came in the next morning, they were gone.

Well, I absolutely panicked! I ran around, found out where they put the trash from then it was the Old House Office Building, I believe, where his office was. And it was in--of course, your memory plays games with you, but my memory is just a big old bin of just trash and I'm standing in the middle of it looking for these copies of letters. I'm finding one here and one there and I'm just frantically grabbing them up. I do not know how many I retrieved, but in any event some of the files remained missing. Johnson just absolutely came unglued, and Mrs. Johnson did, too, about the fact that I had been so foolish as to leave the files on the floor. That incident never left Johnson's mind until he died. And it's been told and retold in various ways many, many times. I had no idea that any person would take something like that as being trash, where it was neatly stacked between two chairs. But it had a lasting impression on me. Right today I will not let anything--or during my entire life--remain on the floor.

But subsequently, later that summer, I worked up there until the summer and then I was accepted into Abbott Hall and I went to Abbott Hall, became an ensign, a ninety-day wonder.

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G: Did you learn much about his activities out on the West Coast during this period?

S: No, I did not. I knew nothing about it except that he had gone. He'd enlisted into the--not enlisted, that isn't right. He received a commission in the navy, volunteered, and went out to the West. Most of the time while I was in Washington the office was run by Mrs. Johnson. Nellie was working there. O. J. Weber was actually the official secretary or administrative assistant, I forget what the title was. I forget who all else was there.

G: Well, he was working out there with a number of manpower programs I understand and attempting to work with NYA programs and establish other manpower programs, and I guess would occasionally come back to Washington.

S: Yes, my recollection is he did.

G: And I think Mrs. Johnson went out there once while he was there a while, didn't she? Do you remember that?

S: No, I do not.

G: Okay.

S: I do remember that one of the events in my life Congressman Johnson arranged, and I forget the details of it, but I went over to the White House to meet President Roosevelt. I was just in awe of that situation.

G: Was this in a group?

S: Yes, I didn't go by myself. Something, we went over there, and he took me and I got to meet President Roosevelt. I don't mean it was a one-on-one situation.

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- G: Did you have any insights about LBJ's relationship with FDR?
- S: I only knew from the campaign in 1941. His interest in Congressman Johnson, obviously President Roosevelt thought a great deal of him and they were friends. I say friends, I'm not talking about friends in the social sense, but he was one of Roosevelt's boys on the Hill.
- G: Yes. Well, let me ask you about Mrs. Johnson and the congressional office. This was the first time I guess that she really became involved in his--
- S: As far as I know.
- G: --legislative activities. Did it take her a while to adjust to this and learn the [office]?
- S: I don't know. All I know is she did an outstanding job. She's a tireless worker and one of the great ladies that I have ever met in my life, in every respect.
- G: Who did she look to for advice on how to handle correspondence or issues?
- S: I guess she looked to John when he was there, and then O. J. I imagine she looked to O. J. She and Nellie, of course, were very close.
- G: Were there other congressmen who gave assistance while he was gone?
- S: I have no specific recollection of it.
- G: I suppose you had already left by the time he went to Australia?
- S: Yes, I had gone.
- G: Did he ever talk to you about that trip?
- S: No.

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G: Never did?

S: No. No.

G: Anything else that happened during that period of months that you recall?

S: Nothing specific except I came to realize what a tireless worker he was, indefatigable. He had a policy in the office that was just-- every letter had to be answered the day it was received. I can't remember an exception. I guess there could be exceptions where you just couldn't get to the answer. And when you worked for Johnson, you worked twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week it seemed like. There was no such thing as Saturday afternoon off or Sunday off or anything like that. His constituency, whenever they wrote him for anything, by golly, you had to get some type of an answer or at least write and say we're working on it, we'll be back in touch. But he just had an absolute fetish about answering mail the day it was received.

G: I guess a long-standing tradition of his.

S: I guess. It certainly was then and remained so for the rest of the time--any contact that I had with him.

And I learned another thing about him. You could never say to Mr. Johnson that you couldn't do something. To him the idea of can't just did not exist. You could do anything if you just put your mind to it and worked hard enough. And you'd just better not ever tell him that you just couldn't do something. You might as well get out of the room. So I learned never to say ["can't"] to him, and I learned also

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that he's probably right. You can do anything if you just put your mind to it. Now, certainly I don't mean the natural things; you can't paint a picture or sing a song, but physical things and mental things you can do if you put your mind to it, and that's the way he thought.

G: He was very interested in absenteeism during this period, particularly in the war-related industries. Did he ever talk with you about that or did you have any opportunity to observe his interest here?

S: No. Not that I recall, no.

G: Okay.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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