INTERVIEW I

DATE: December 1, 1977

INTERVIEWEE: J. WILLIAM THEIS

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: Mr. Theis' office, Washington, D. C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: I think we're on now.

T: My personal contacts as a reporter with Mr. Johnson go back to the early 1940s. I came to Washington in May of 1942 from Pennsylvania, where I had been state manager of International News Service. Wanting to get back to being a reporter, I managed to get transferred out of the administrative and back into the reporting business as a correspondent in the Washington bureau.

My first assignment after arrival here was to take charge of the INS House staff. Lyndon Johnson was then a member of the House. I recall my first recollection of my first personal contact with him--I think it was either late 1942 or early 1943--going over to see him in his office in the Old House Office Building, back in the farthest corner of the building. It was either the fourth or the fifth floor. We had a brief chat, just talking about things that he was involved in. He was then on the House Naval Affairs Committee, studying at the knee of Uncle Carl Vinson, the chairman. At that point I believe he had been out in the Pacific and come back.

But [this was] my first experience of his persuasive abilities and what can be called arm-twisting. This wasn't that, but as I

was about to leave he put his arm around my shoulder--we scarcely knew each other--and he said, "Bill, I spent the weekend up in New York with Dick Berlin." Well, Dick Berlin at that time was president of the Hearst Corporation, which owned the INS, the organization for which I worked. It was Lyndon's way of letting me know that he was on the inside track. Of course he had by that time attracted a great deal of attention outside of Washington because of his close relation with FDR, who was then in the White House.

I covered him occasionally because the House is a large body and I was running a wire service staff, dealing with wartime issues. He was just one of four hundred and thirty-five members, of course. It really wasn't until he came to the Senate that I began a closer reporter's relationship with him, from the time he was in the Senate until he moved up into the leadership and on through the vice presidency and through the presidency. Although my coverage downtown of the White House was limited directly or continuously to the last eight months of his presidential term, when I left the United Press International, which was a successor organization to INS and took charge of the Hearst Newspaper Bureau, in May of 1968. So I came into this coverage of the presidency in what was the twilight of it. I covered the campaign, the Humphrey-Nixon campaign, and I covered Mr. Johnson as president during the 1964 presidential campaign.

Over the years I was impressed, as everyone was, with his great legislative talent, his ability to get people moving in the same

direction that he wanted to go. Persuasion to LBJ was about as normal as breathing. I mean he worked the territory all the time. He never seemed to let up. It took a great deal out of him I know, but as most of us will recall, from the time he had his initial heart attack, everybody was concerned that he was coming back or might come back to the job too quickly. His doctors very wisely recognized that for Johnson the frustration of not being able to participate and exercise his God-given talents would be worse than doing it. So he did come back much more quickly, I think, than most of us in the media who were covering the Senate and the vice presidency in those days expected.

There are some personality things which I always found fascinating about him. He was a complete extrovert, as I've indicated a little earlier, unlike Richard Nixon who was an introvert and an obviously very insecure person. Johnson was both generous and I know to staff people his generosity at times seemed to be matched by his lack of consideration for personal feelings. I heard that from staff people. I always thought to myself, I didn't know how I could function for somebody who could blow so easily hot and cold in his personal relationships. But on the matter of generosity, I don't think he fully understood how that might be perceived by others under certain conditions.

There's one occasion when he was vice president and made his 1961 trip around the world that pointed that up for me. We were on his plane. There were about twenty-five, I believe, correspondents

who made that trip through the Pacific, through the Far East, and on around the world. Just as an example of a small blind spot I think he had: we were flying toward Hong Kong and most of us were up in his quarters chatting. Jokingly somebody asked what shopping he was going to do in Hong Kong. I spoke up and said, "Well, Mr. Vice President, I have a watch on my wrist here which I bought in Hong Kong in 1953 when I was there with then-Vice President Nixon. It was a great buy." He said, "Theis, why don't you keep your mouth shut?"

Well, that triggered something in my mind. We landed at our first stop en route to Hong Kong--I can't recall which one it was. I think it was the Philippines or Taipei. I was in the wire car with George Reedy, who was press secretary to the vice president. I said, "George, maybe I'm anticipating something that isn't going to happen, but the way Johnson spoke back there about watches, he isn't by any chance thinking of buying watches for the members of this press party, is he? Because if he is, I'm concerned that it might be an embarrassing situation. There might well be someone who could say they couldn't accept it. He would be hurt and it would be an embarrassing situation." Reedy, being an old friend who had worked for United Press when I was working for INS, totally honest, said, "Well, the trouble is, he's already bought the damn watches. He bought them in Washington before he left." So I said, "Well, I hope nothing happens." But nothing more was said about it.

He did do some shopping in Hong Kong. As it turned out he bought some decorative Chinese silk shirts which later were given to some of the women on the trip, women reporters. We went all the way around the world and when we were coming back, our last night out, we stopped in Bermuda. As sometimes happens on those trips, there was a little party. Those of us in the press group wrote some songs and had some little fun about it. Just before the little party began, Johnson came down to the lounge area, which was a dance floor and a dining area. [He] beckoned me over, came over and put his arm around my shoulder and walked me across the dance floor by myself and said, "Now, Bill, don't you worry about those watches. They only cost me thirteen dollars back in Washington. If you don't feel you can take one of them, give it to your brother or your son or your father or something." I said, "Don't worry about it, Mr. Vice President, I don't think it will be any problem."

It turned out, I took the watch. Everybody did. He had watches for the men and shirts for the women correspondents. I accepted the watch. I knew the spirit in which it was being given and I gave it to my son when I got back. But it was a small blind spot. Being more concerned with being generous and wanting to be liked and being a thoughtful person, he didn't perceive that to any outsider this might be taken as something they should not accept and would not accept. By the time we got to that, the word had gone around the press group that something like this was probably going to happen.

I felt personally that I was trying to head off trouble for him and avoid an embarrassment that I don't think he fully realized might have occurred. Fortunately, it did not.

G: I get the impression that reporters who received this sort of personal generosity felt compelled even more to show their independence and write more objective stories than they might otherwise. Do you think that was the case?

T: Well, that could be. That could be the case. This incident I described of course is a kind of extreme example. In today's time, in the wake of Watergate and many other things, I don't think this sort of thing would even occur because most politicians are too astute for that sort of thing. But I understood the manner in which he did it, and I think he probably did only pay thirteen dollars for the watches. I believe they were Bulovas and the head of Bulova is an old personal friend of his. The watch incidentally was an attractive Bulova. It wasn't obviously an expensive watch, but it had a black face with the LBJ initials in script in the very center and the golden rule inscribed around inside the numerals. It was a gesture on his part of appreciation and so on and so forth.

G: While we're on that trip, let me ask you if you have any insight concerning his attitude toward Diem. It seemed to me that he was much more enthusiastic about the Diem regime than Kennedy was. Did you get that feeling at all?

T: Well, I suppose it might be a by-product of--this has just occurred to me, I hadn't thought about it in those terms--what you might call

his frontier heritage and background. As it turned out, in 1964 and 1965 he was a very cautious person but he nevertheless was a hawk on Vietnam. I think he may have expected a lot more of Diem, as many people did, than would ever have been possible. What most Americans did not realize and I didn't fully realize--I had been in Vietnam with Nixon in 1953 when he made his global trip, two and a half months around the world, but most of which was spent in the Far East. We were up in Hanoi and the Red River Delta. It was then the French fighting the Viet Minh. We should have learned from that that it was a losing cause. If we were going to make a commitment we should have done it a lot more cautiously than we did.

Yet when Johnson made the big commitment in 1965 it was done with a great deal of political caution. I was in Minneapolis covering the national governors' conference at the time--that was 1965--and he sent Vice President Humphrey out to make a speech to the governors. The speech was strictly a guns and butter speech, that we can do both. It was near the close of that conference that he invited all the governors to come to Washington, at which time he was going to announce his decision on what further commitment to make to the Vietnam situation. The way the thing was built up, he didn't move until he had had all those governors come in the White House and all but one or two of them give a full-fledged endorsement of what he was about to do when he made the big commitment of--what was it?--I forget the precise numbers, but the big influx of American troops to Vietnam.

G: On the 1961 trip, was there anything else here that you recall with regard to Vietnam that's important?

T: One thing I recall: when we arrived at Tan Son Nhut Airport, in that stifling, humid heat, he literally walked most of the way from the airport into downtown Saigon, in and out of the car, but it was an exhausting experience for everybody. I don't remember how far it is, a matter of miles, but he walked, pressing the flesh, native Vietnamese, along the roadsides. When we arrived in the center of Saigon he made that great arm-waving speech, paraphrasing Winston Churchill, fight them on the beaches and so forth and so on. I mean he was totally carried away by the occasion.

He went from that kind of extreme to the almost comical one of--we were out in the outer suburbs of Saigon and he discovered a herd of Santa Gertrudis cattle which had been bred at the King Ranch, I guess, and been transplanted to Vietnam. So the photographers could get a picture of him, he chased those steers around this pasture within sight of a South Vietnamese guard tower where Secret Service were very concerned, because there was an occasional presence of the North Vietnamese guerrillas in that area, even as they were infiltrating Saigon.

G: Did he talk to you at all about his feelings concerning Vietnam at this point? Did he indicate what we ought to do while he was over there?

T: Of course he was vice president. He was merely a spokesman, a conveyer belt for what President Kennedy would have wanted done. I do

recall one early aspect of this. It's again a reflection on his sensitivity to the media. Spencer Davis, who was the Associated Press reporter on the trip, happened to be their Far Eastern specialist. The reason he made the trip was because most of the time was going to be spent in Southeast Asia and the Far East. The day before we left on the trip Davis broke a story saying that Vice President Johnson was taking to Saigon a commitment of a hundred million dollars--I believe that's the precise figure--in new and additional aid for the South Vietnamese government. Well, Johnson was, if not enraged, terribly upset by this because he obviously had wanted to have that announcement made when he arrived in Saigon. For the first several days of the trip as we flew across the Pacific, stopping first in Honolulu where he dedicated the East-West School at the University of Hawaii, which is a new enterprise, he literally berated Spencer Davis in public at every news conference, chided him for having this erroneous story on it. Of course, everybody by that time knew the story was correct. But it literally galled LBJ because this thing had been in effect leaked by somebody else and exposed. The sort of thing that by then he should have learned as a politician happens to all politicians and happens with many newsmen.

G: I wonder where Davis got the story?

T: I think he obviously got it from somebody in the South Vietnamese desk in the State Department or at the South Vietnamese embassy, which would have known by then about it. Obviously though the source could

have been any one of a half dozen. I don't think it came from the Johnson staff because Spence Davis, in those days, was covering the State Department. He wasn't covering the Hill per se.

G: He stopped at the Philippines. This is after Vietnam. Do you have any recollections there on that?

T: I've been there three times: twice with Nixon, once as vice president, then as president, and there was Johnson; it tends to blur. I don't have any specific recollections of the visit to the Philippines.

G: He went from there to Taiwan and met with Chiang Kai-Shek. Do you have any recollections of that visit?

T: Briefly. So much of this kind of trip is pro forma, it's protocol, protocolese. I had been there when Nixon had his visit with Chiang Kai-Shek in 1953 and the Johnson visit was almost a carbon copy. What was said, some of it was said in private, some was said in public when the press pool was aboard. It was more showmanship for the record than anything else.

G: What did he say about Chiang Kai-Shek? Did he have any characterizations or attitudes that he discussed with the press?

T: Not that I recall. I don't recall anything specific. Of course that was 1961. That was before a lot of water went over the damn. But the whole posture from the early fifties was still one of support of and cooperation with the regime. The economics recovery and strength of that island and that government was just beginning to unfold, and it's been, of course, one of the showcases of the Far East in economic terms. I think our government was aware of that. They

were not happy about some of the leftover commitments from the Quemoy-Matsu days, the Eisenhower years. It was one of those things that has continued up until--and still continues to a large extent. I don't recall anything specific that would bear on the substance of the [meeting]. We were just really in and out, in one day and, as I recall, out the next evening.

G: Then you went to Thailand and from there to India. Do those stops ring any bells?

T: The Indian stop does, maybe for the reason that he was concerned and impressed and obviously distraught at the poverty in the Indian villages, which everyone is who sees it for the first time. It's something almost beyond our comprehension and it still goes on even though that country now has had a great deal of economic recovery.

But one day I remember in particular, the day we went to Agra to visit the Taj Mahal, which was Lyndon and Lady Bird's wedding anniversary. It was a terribly hot day. It must have been a hundred and twenty degrees. We spent about two and a half to three hours visiting several villages. None of us even had any headgear to protect [us]. I almost had a sun stroke. I didn't have a hat of any kind. Bill McEvoy who was then a vice president of Pan American, which was the airline we used on the trip, had a broad-brimmed Panama hat. I have a picture of it here in this book that I did on the Congress--[a picture] of Lyndon in one of those villages. He wore that; McEvoy gave up the hat. McEvoy, who was stone bald, gave up the hat so that Johnson could have some protection from the intense heat.

We spent, as I say, about three hours tramping through villages. But in one village in particular--it may have only [been] one of adjoining villages--he went to the village well and tried to explain to these people through interpreters how during the New Deal days they began to bring power to rural Texas and rural America, so they could have electric pumps to drill and pump the wells, and what a godsend this was and would be. Of course, this is the sort of thing that our aid program was doing and attempting to do throughout many of the needy countries. He kind of transmitted on that one day I thought, more of his feel for the land and his feel for the poor, which was all part of his own experience, having been raised as he was, than he did at any other point.

Pakistan, I think, was the next stop. Anyway, that's where he had the camel incident, invited the camel driver to come to Washington, which he did.

G: Were you present when that episode took place?

T: Yes.

G: What happened?

T: Well, as I recall, we were moving along. It was what the Nixon White House later called a photo opportunity. There was a man with a camel, so you go over and handshake the camel driver and the picture was taken. Through the interpreter, there was a conversation. The invitation was graciously extended by Johnson, "Come to Washington." By one means or another, I don't recall now who followed it up, but the camel driver came and voiced all those poetic utterances, which

everybody was convinced came out of the interpreter rather than out of the camel driver. He had a very pleasant several days. They bought him a nice blue truck and the poor man didn't know what to do with the truck. It was one of those typical unfortunate incidents. His life for a time after he got back was enlivened and prospered, but then I gather from later reports, it sort of all drifted away.

G: Rags to riches and back to rags. Well, was this something that had advance planning or was it something that just happened spontaneously? In other words, did they plan this as a photo opportunity and station this camel driver there? Did they know he was going to be there or was it a situation where the motorcade was just going along the road?

T: I don't know. I don't recall. It very easily could have been an arranged thing. I just don't know. At the time it happened it appeared not to have been. It's the sort of thing you would see anywhere in Pakistan.

G: Were you present when Johnson visited the Taj Mahal?

T: Yes, as I was saying, we were all about out on our feet. I had been there before. I had really been so exposed to that extreme sun and heat that I simply had to get into some shade in a very hurry. The only shade there was was right at the entry portico. I had our UPI New Delhi bureau chief with me, helping out on the story because it was an awful lot to cover. We were also trying of course to cover Mrs. Johnson at the time. But he went with the Johnsons down to the other end of the pool when he went in the mosque. He was with

him when he let go with this Texas wahoo shout, which made the news. I wasn't right at his side when that happened, but you could hear it.

G: Oh, could you really?

T: Yes.

G: Anything else on that trip that you recall?

T: Little things, mainly. I'm trying to recall if there was anything else in that Far Eastern portion. I recall--it's a typical LBJ story--when we were in Saigon we came back in from this day we were out in the surrounding countryside. Everybody was soaked with perspiration, including the Vice President. He invited us all, about twenty-eight reporters, men and women, including several foreign correspondents who didn't know Johnson at all. They were stationed out there. And in the big sitting bedroom on the second floor of the palace, Lyndon proceeded to strip and give himself a towel rub. There were no women around, I take that back. There were no women, but there were several foreign correspondents, males who didn't know him. And he proceeded to dry himself off and proceeded to climb back into fresh clothes while conducting a running press conference. Of course all of us were rather holding our breath hoping Lady Bird wouldn't walk in from the adjoining bedroom in the middle of all this because it would have been embarrassing for her as well as for the strangers who were present. But that's the kind of thing that [is] unimportant historically, but it was typical of his [manner]. He wanted to have everybody be part of his scene, wherever it was, if at all possible.

I know we tried to give them as much privacy as possible. I was still working for a wire service in those days and our primary reason for being on a trip like that is protective coverage, along with everything else. Obviously twenty-five or twenty-eight reporters can't go everywhere that the Vice President goes under some circumstances, so you'll have a pool of two or three people. I recall that I was not about to let him out of my sight if I could avoid it because anything could happen.

I remember this one day I was in Athens with our local correspondent, who is a Greek and knew the area. We followed Mr. and Mrs. Johnson and their Secret Service detail. They wanted to do some private sight-seeing. We followed them at a respectful distance and parked a half block behind them when they got out to look at something. But we wanted to be within coverage range for protective coverage for everybody else on the trip as well as for all our papers and radio and TV stations around the world. He didn't like it at all. They all like to get away for some privacy on a thing like that. I remember when we got back, he and Mrs. Johnson went up to the Parthenon. He called me over--I was there with my local correspondent and he wanted to know if I didn't want to have a picture taken with them in front of the Parthenon. I said that would be very nice and it was done. My local correspondent took the picture. It's the kind of thing [he did]. He was thoughtful. He would do those little things that were reflective of his basic human nature.

G: He developed the practice of collecting art from the countries that he visited. I'm wondering if you saw him buy any art on this trip?

T: A lot of those things he doesn't have time to do. You don't have time to do any shopping. Sometimes reporters find some time. Usually the wife of a vice president or president will be taken on a shopping tour or the VIP will go into a shop because that shows your interest and so forth and so on. He did, I know, as Nixon did and all presidents and vice presidents, have a lot of things given to them, some of which he could [keep]. Over a certain amount all has to be turned over to the State Department. I wasn't aware if purchases like that were made. They were probably made by Mrs. Johnson.

G: Now that we've gotten back to the U.S., let's shift back to the Senate years and talk about particular recollections that you have there.

T: Well, I was first head of the INS Senate staff and then when INS merged with UPI, I was just moved across the aisle and ran the UPI Senate staff for another ten years. Most of us covering the Senate on a day-to-day basis--it's the busiest news beat in Washington, without question--were impressed with his grasp of the legislative process. Remembering of course he had this [interest], I guess had it in his bones, his father having been a member of the Texas Legislature, he had been interested in politics from his younger years. He had a feel for it. I think he really loved Congress as an institution, as people who spend most of their lives there tend to do. The Senate, being a much more personal body, because they are fewer

in number and you can work your personal magic on individuals much more easily than you can in the House where you deal with things in bodies and droves, he very quickly became recognized. Of course it was [through] his close association with Dick Russell in particular. That I guess came in part through his interest in the armed services legislation, which goes back to the House Naval Affairs Committee and Carl Vinson, who was a fellow Georgian of Dick Russell's. As Johnson was a protege of Sam Rayburn's he became, in a sense, at least a partial protege of Russell's. Johnson went to the right well when he went to Dick Russell. They were fellow southerners. Johnson was of course a captive of his environment in political terms. I think he always had his eye on the White House but getting there was a very difficult thing.

G: Did you ever have occasion to see them together or to hear them talking? Do you recall any particular instances that illustrate their relationship, Johnson and Russell?

T: Well, of course Russell, less than let's say Walter George who was a pretty private person, was a very private person. He was in a sense somewhat like Sam Rayburn. Being a bachelor, he lived a fairly private life. He wasn't a social hound, whatever you might want to call him. So you didn't see as much of that between Johnson and Russell as you might, let's say, between a more outgoing person like Bob Kerr. I've been at small lunches with Johnson and Bob Kerr, with whom he was very close, where there was a lot of very frank discussion about legislation, personal things and that sort [of thing].

G: Do you recall anything in particular here?

T: Most of it would be personal anecdotal things. I don't remember any specifics. It was during the period when Johnson was majority leader and later vice president. They worked very closely. Of course they had a common interest in such things as oil legislation, just to take one off the top of the heap, being from the same part of the country.

G: Natural gas.

T: Natural gas.

G: There's some evidence that Johnson did not like to talk particularly on the record about how he was able to get things done, how he was able to maneuver pieces of legislation to passage, because he didn't want to make other senators look bad. He felt that that might cause his ability to continue to do so to evaporate. Did the Senate press feel this way about him at the time, that he was guarding his techniques?

T: I think we thought--I know I did--that he always wanted to keep his maneuvering room, he wanted to protect his techniques as much as possible. I think it's probably true that he didn't want to embarrass another senator with whom he had had some quid pro quo and that sort of thing that goes on all the time in the legislative process. Yet there would be times when he might be a little boastful about what he had achieved and how he had done it, always on an off-the-record basis. He was a great mimic. He could mimic other senators, especially ones for whom he didn't have any great high regard, but with whom he still had to live as a member of the Senate.

But he protected his [flank]. He never moved legislatively without putting his toe out and testing the ground ahead of him. He never brought anything to a vote--I can't say never, but unless he had to--until he was pretty sure he had the votes lined up for whatever proposal he had before the Senate. The same thing was true--of course he had less of that when he was vice president. But he tried to protect his flank, have his front well prepared.

G: Do you recall any particular occasion where he let his hair down and talked about how he had persuaded a particular senator or had engineered a majority for a controversial bill?

T: I don't, at the moment, recall any specific [incidents].

(Interruption)

The question of Johnson postponing the vote for several hours on the Capehart Amendment in 1955 while awaiting the return of several senators, including Humphrey whose plane was delayed by bad weather. This was the kind of thing for which Johnson had a feel. It was an accommodation for those people as well as a needed way to have the votes when he needed them. But he had an ability to sense these things in advance, not the weather, obviously, but to sense what the conditions might be and not to schedule a vote on something until he knew he was going to have his troops there. That also sounds like a simple thing, but in the Senate where individuals just take off, it takes a lot of musical chairs to arrange the votes. If a member of the Senate says, "Well, I'm sorry, Mr. Leader, but I have to be in Paducah, Kentucky for something that's of pressing

interest to my state," he's got to be in Paducah, Kentucky in most cases. Working your way around those personal imperatives can require a good deal of personal persuasion. He was very good at it. It's the kind of thing that I think Bobby Byrd is doing now. The way he got the Senate leadership job, is by having so many IOU's out for that kind of accommodation when he was whip. That counts for a lot around the Senate.

G: I guess also the reverse was true. When Johnson felt like he didn't have enough votes he would wait until a number of senators from the other side were away and then vote. Do you recall an instance where he was able to pull this off?

T: I don't remember any specific, but it's part of the pattern of legislative leadership and he was awfully good at it. He was working the territory day and night. He had a tendency through second and third parties of knowing what everybody was doing privately, publicly, politically, so that he could anticipate these things before they came at him.

G: Did he get information from members of the press on this?

T: Well, he would get it inferentially. Several of us: Jack Bell, who ran the AP staff; I, when I was running the INS staff; Ray Lahr, when he was running the UP staff--I was his successor at the UPI--would have periodic meetings with Johnson as leader and as vice president, always on Saturday mornings, if [at] no other [time]. Of course on the working days when the Senate was in session, he'd be on and off the floor all the time, but on Saturdays we had kind

of a fixed ten-thirty, eleven o'clock, sit-down session. Sometimes it was on the record, sometimes it was background, sometimes it would be both. It was in that kind of session when you got a feel for what he was doing. Very often off the record. Then he would go into some private explanation of how he had gotten something done. Most of those kinds of things were typical of each other. They weren't necessarily too unique because it's the sort of thing. . . .

G: Do you recall any in particular?

T: No, I don't right now. I may think of something later.

Of course, these years, too, these 1955 years, were years of Republican administration in Washington. I don't think it was ever easy for Johnson to be extremely critical of Eisenhower. I think he had a built-in native admiration or respect for him, which most Americans did, as a military leader. Conversely, I think he recognized very early on that Ike was going to be one of the world's worst politicians or political leaders, which proved to be true. Ike was a passive president. One reason for that was his nature. But fundamentally I don't think he wanted to extend the presidential constitutional powers. I think he felt intrinsically that there was a definite limit. He was not one to reach out for more executive power. He felt, basically, that this would abuse the constitutional balance of powers. When Johnson became president, he at one point was quoted as saying that he believed or he had always believed--I forget the precise quote--more in the balance of power than in the separation of powers, that the three branches should work more closely together,

which of course having come out of the legislative branch and going into the executive branch, he was in a position to do. That obviously is one reason why he was as successful as he was. He knew how to deal with Congress because he knew it like the back of his hand, unlike even FDR, who was a product of a different time and hadn't spent those years in Congress. Nixon had spent those years in Congress just as Johnson had, but he didn't have the same capacity for translating that experience into [action].

G: How would you characterize Johnson's relations with each of his Republican counterparts. Taft and then Knowland and then Dirksen?

T: Well, Johnson had a good working, personal relationship with Ev Dirksen, who was much out of the same kind of mold. They were both extrovert, outgoing people who could wheel and deal with ease. They talked each other's language. I spent about as much time around Ev Dirksen as I did around Lyndon Johnson during those Senate years, after Dirksen got into the leadership after first Bob Taft, then Knowland left the scene. They had a great rapport and an understanding of the system and a respect for the White House. They were legislative creatures, born out of the process.

G: I get the feeling that there was a mutual trust between Johnson and Dirksen that was not enjoyed between Johnson and Nixon during this period that Nixon was vice president.

T: Oh, I think that's probably true because in the first place, the vice president has very little authority. A former senator, when he becomes vice president, drops down. Johnson never had the clout as

vice president that he had as leader, obviously. You can't transfer that power the way you might assume one could, because you're in the other branch.

Taft was intellectually arrogant. The old saying is that Taft had the best mind in the Senate until he made it up. But intellectually he had little tolerance for the thoughts or expressions of people beneath him intellectually. He was a very sharp man. He didn't have the capacity for personal leadership that Johnson had because he was a different kind of man, just as Nixon was.

G: Did Johnson regard Knowland as more of an adversary than he regarded Dirksen?

T: Well, I think only because of Knowland's basic unthrottled conservatism. Knowland was straining to make a mark. He was an extremely intense [man]; he was uptight, tight as a drum all the time. I think there was a mutual respect there but it wasn't the relationship that Johnson had with Dirksen. They had both come out of the House, for example. They had both been on the Hill. Knowland didn't.

G: It seems that Knowland was occasionally outsmarted by Johnson. Do you recall any instances?

T: I don't recall any specifics but it wouldn't [surprise me]. I'm sure it happened, because Knowland didn't have the respect as a leader that Johnson had. I mean they just weren't in the same ball park.

G: Let's talk about Johnson and the press now during the Senate years. Did he trust the members of the press who were covering him there?

T: Well, I think that varied with the degree to which he knew people. I mean I think he trusted people like myself, Ray Lahr, Jack Bell, the Senate veteran reporters. You learn by experience whether you can trust a reporter, and a reporter learns whether he can trust a news source, just by what happens, by the track record. You get burned once or twice, you learn very, very quickly.

One of the things I learned fairly early on with Johnson: if you wanted his respect as a reporter, and I think this was probably true of members of Congress as well, you had to speak up to him. You couldn't let him walk over you. If he was handing you a line of guff you had to let him know that you understood it was a line of guff. Either laugh at it or, you know, say "You're not kidding an old reporter like me," or something like that to let him know he wasn't getting away [with it]. Because he was used to doing this with everybody so much that if he learned he could get away with it, I think he lost respect for the individual.

G: Are you thinking of something specific here?

T: Well, one thing which isn't an exact illustration of that, but your ability to talk to him or talk back to him might be reflected by one little incident which is entirely personal.

During the 1964 campaign--of course he was then president, running against Goldwater--we had a three-stop day. It was Boston, Pittsburgh, then, as I recall, Albuquerque. Pittsburgh was my hometown. I was flying on Air Force One with him as a pool. We had this big rally in downtown Boston, it was very hectic. We got

out to the airport; we were flying towards Pittsburgh. I told him at some point, "Mr. President, you're going to my hometown. I hope you make a real good speech." So the campaign speech that early evening was in the civic auditorium, up in the old hill district. There was a heavy labor-oriented crowd and he made a very good speech, except that we all started closing our typewriters and getting ready to get up and go, and he kept on talking. So we had to settle back and listen to another ten minutes. "Well, he's going to quit right now," and he kept on a third time. So everybody was getting restless, including the audience. The whole thing was a good speech but it was way too long. I think he'd had a couple of drinks on the plane coming in and he was feeling his oats. He had his audience the first time around, in his hand.

So we finally get back on [the plane]. We still have to fly to Albuquerque from Pittsburgh. It's now about eleven o'clock. We get back out at the plane, we're sitting at the press table, the three or four of us in the pool. He came up forward and sat down on the arm of my seat and said, "Well, Bill, how did you like that speech in Pittsburgh?" I said, "Well, Mr. President, I thought that first speech was fine. I thought the second one was much better. The third one really was a lulu." He looked at me, kind of startled that anybody would talk to the President of the United States like that. He said, "What are you trying to do, Bob Hope me?"
(Laughter)

But you could be kidding with him as you could with somebody like Jack Kennedy, too. I didn't cover the White House on a daily basis but after he became president he had people with whom he had a lot of rapport and he could let you talk on a very personal basis.

G: Were you with Lyndon Johnson when he had that July 2 press conference before his heart attack in 1955?

T: Yes, that's an incident I related, as I recall, on the LBJ Library panel. That was a Saturday morning; it was about eleven o'clock, as I recall. We had a normal Saturday morning session. There were about four of us: myself, Ed [Edwin B.] Haakinson of the AP, I believe Ray Lahr then of the UP, and John Chadwick of the AP staff. We had gone over a whole series of pending legislative questions. He was very responsive on all of them except one. There was one thing that John Chadwick was interested in. John Chadwick, by the way, is a very soft-spoken, quiet-mannered person, a fine newsman. And he knew Johnson very well, as we all did. But Johnson didn't want to talk about this one bill or one issue. I don't recall what it was. He was just silent on it.

After he had opened up on all these other things, Chadwick, near the end of the session with him, said, "Well, Mr. Johnson, you've been very forthright on all these other things, I'm just curious why can't you tell us anything about this one thing that I've been asking you about?" Johnson, obviously not well, out of control, just blew his stack completely and berated Chadwick for being so offensive and persisting when he didn't want to answer. We were

all shocked, literally shocked by this, because it was totally out of character. As I think I said, I'd never seen him lose his cool in a way like that. So we quickly broke it off. A couple of us said, "Well, Lyndon, John didn't mean anything by that. It's just a perfectly normal question." So we broke the session off. It was about noon and he left immediately to go out to the Brown estate, and had his heart attack. I have always had a feeling since then that he was almost having the heart attack at that moment. This was just something that triggered--you know, you had the impression that he suddenly had a high blood pressure that just went bang.

G: Did he berate the other reporters who took up for Chadwick at the time?

T: No, no, no. It was all over in a minute because we broke the thing up right away. There was no point. He obviously was distraught and terribly upset. We felt he must have had something else on his mind that was bothering him to cause him to explode like that.

G: Did he ever talk about that incident again in later years?

T: No, nobody ever brought it up again. Because it was obviously something he never would have done under normal physical conditions. It was completely out of character for him.

G: Anything on Johnson's relations with other senators, like Johnson's relations with Humphrey?

T: Well, I think Johnson and Humphrey, during their Senate years, always had a good relationship. I think Johnson always probably thought that Humphrey was too liberal maybe for his own good at a given

moment, too loquacious for his own good at any moment, because he was such an effusive talker. Yet I guess I'm assuming that he respected him for his broad knowledge of all the current issues that were then before the country. He was an expert on everything from nuclear disarmament to agriculture to economics to--you name it--the big economics, reciprocal trade, anything else. Humphrey had made himself a student of all these issues. That was obviously why I think Johnson tapped him to be his vice president.

I never had any doubt in my own mind that they went through this illusion of trying to make that 1964 vice presidential selection some kind of a mystery by dragging poor Tom Dodd up there in the airplane with Hubert Humphrey. There was never any doubt in my mind that Humphrey was going to be the nominee, from weeks in advance. Because Johnson told Humphrey to go out and establish a base, to go out and demonstrate that he was popular and had the support around the country. And Humphrey did, with delegates and with fellow politicians. That whole thing was just an effort to make a dull convention look exciting. But I think Johnson respected Humphrey for his obvious grasp of these issues which were going to confront any president.

Personally I always, and I still feel, that if there was any one factor that cost Humphrey the election of 1968 it was President Johnson's unwillingness or failure to go all out sooner for him. He could not, it seemed to me, ever quite swallow the fact that Humphrey wanted to do something different about Vietnam. It was

such a close election, such a close election. Of course it was an aftermath of the 1968 convention. It was a terrible political disaster. Humphrey needed every bit of help he could have gotten. What he got from Johnson I'm afraid was too little and too late.

G: Did you ever talk to Humphrey about that? Johnson's [attitude]?

T: No, I don't recall that I did. I don't think he would have complained. It was apparent to me and I know it was to a lot of other newspaper people. But I always thought that you could say the convention did it, that something else did it, but the one person who could have made a big difference was the President. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm being unfair, but I had that feeling. Because I couldn't understand it myself. Why would you pick a man to be your vice presidential running mate in a terribly close campaign and not go beyond what anybody would expect to see that he would win, when the alternative was Dick Nixon?

G: One example of Johnson's reluctance here that has been cited has been his unwillingness to give Humphrey the contributors list until very late.

T: I'm not aware of that. I may have been aware of it at the time but I don't recall it. Do you recall--I think it was Humphrey made a foreign policy speech in New Orleans?

G: I thought it was Salt Lake City.

T: Salt Lake City. And Johnson undercut it. Johnson, in effect, said something the next day that [undercut it].

G: Was this the speech that was the departure from the traditional Johnson policy?

T: Yes, yes, yes. It may have been Salt Lake City. It was a good speech. It was a newsworthy speech, but it was a departure from the Johnson policy on Vietnam. I mean, he had to be given the leeway to be his own man on that issue, because it would have been dishonest if anything else. But that's all over the dam now.

G: Is there anything else that you have in your notes here that you want to work up?

T: I've always thought it was unfortunate--I don't know what's happened lately, but it's a reflection of the hot and cold staff relationship that I referred to earlier. I always thought it was a sad thing that in his last months and last years that I guess it was the bitterness over George Reedy's book that cut that cord completely. I thought that was unfortunate. I still think that was unfortunate, because Reedy never complained about a thing. And I can remember many instances when Johnson would overtly in front of reporters chew Reedy out for some [thing], in a very demeaning way, which we all thought was unfair, because Reedy was a very loyal and hard-working staff man. I don't have any particular reason to believe George's book was born out of personal bitterness on his part, because he left earlier.

If I remember right, George was in Doctor's Hospital. I think he was in there to have that foot surgery. He had that hammerhead toes [hammer toes] or something. My wife and I stopped by to see

him, and his wife, Lillian, was in the room. Lillian was an old INS former reporter, colleague of mine, but a longtome personal friend. George was saying he thought he'd be in the hospital a few more days and then maybe rest at home. While we were talking the phone rang and George kind of cradled the telephone close to his chest. It was obviously a very private call. So Jane and I took his wife over to the other side of the room and chatted so as not to intrude on his conversation. The next day George was back at his desk in the White House, back in as assistant or press secretary. I never asked him, but I'm sure that call was from Lyndon saying he wanted him back at work the next day. He needed him obviously. He got up out of his hospital bed and went back to the White House the next day. You know, that's symptomatic of the kind of loyalty that [he inspired].

I used to ask George, "My God, George, how can you take that kind of stuff?" when he would be chewed out by Johnson, maybe in front of me or two or three other people. Just unnecessarily, really, almost as if he were showing off. George would say, and other staff people would always say the same thing, "Well, you don't know how thoughtful he can be at other times." He'd just turn it off and turn right around and do something generous and thoughtful for a staff person.

G: They really seemed to have just ignored this sort of abuse.

T: Well, they must have. It's the only way you could exist. If you let it get to you. . . . My point is it's one thing to have it done

privately; it's another thing to have it done in front of other people, which I always thought was out of character really for him to do. But I suppose he got sort of carried away with his other problems.

G: I get the impression that Walter Jenkins was very good at ignoring Johnson's outbursts.

T: Yes, Walter was so good at ignoring it, he took it all apparently internally. It worked its havoc on him emotionally, I guess, and physically.

G: While we're talking about aides, anything on Bobby Baker that you recall?

T: Only the general knowledge that Bobby was a very sharp operator. He was a good news source, as I also indicated in that panel at the Library. In the wake of Leslie Biffle, who was the secretary of the Senate during the Truman years, as vice president briefly and then as president, Bobby knew what was going on because he was very close to Bob Kerr and very close to Johnson. He was responsible for seeing that orders were carried out that involved the floor. In the process of which, to know whether somebody was going to be on the Senate floor at a given time you have to know what he's up to personally and privately almost on a day and night basis. A person in that job as secretary to the minority or secretary to the majority becomes privy to an awful lot of things. He's carrying a lot of information around which, if he ever divulged some of it he would be out on his ear.

Of course they had a close working relationship. One thing that is lost I think on people who aren't familiar with either the Senate, the House, or the news process, is that an awful lot of what happens downtown inside the White House, inside the department, anywhere, you find out about it as a reporter on the Hill before you find out about it at the White House or at the State Department or at the Pentagon because every important member of Congress has lines into these agencies, including the White House. They hear things, depending on your closeness to them. All kinds of stories break first from the Hill. They may not be identified as coming from the Hill source, but that happens so often. That's one of the reasons why Bobby Baker was very important because he heard things. And he was quite a good news source for reporters he knew well.

G: Do you think that Johnson expected reporters to be public relations agents for him?

T: He might have thought in the ideal that that could happen. That's a try-everything process. You sail a pitch out and see if it hits anything and you sail another one. As I say, he wouldn't try that with somebody who understood him and for whom he had some respect.

G: Do you think that his standards were too high in terms of what to expect from a reporter's article about him, let's say?

T: You mean his standards too high or his hopes too high?

G: His hopes too high.

T: As I say, he was working the territory day and night. We tend to forget that he was involved in the media himself. I mean the family

owned a radio and television station in Austin. He was very conscious of these relationships. I remember one time, years back, he was floor leader I guess, and somehow the subject came up about newspapers. We were chatting in the hallway, two or three of us with him. I made some offhand remark about the big Friday paper [and] the time for a news story. The Friday papers were all full of all this shopping, grocery store advertising. He said, "It's not Friday, it's Thursday." I said, "No, no. It's Friday." Of course I was wrong. He knew because he was involved in the advertising business on a personal basis. He was aware. Not very much missed him.

G: Did he ever chide you for writing a story that he disagreed with or didn't feel was [accurate]?

T: Oh, yes. Especially if it was something that was reporting from another source something that he was doing or was up to in legislative terms. He'd call up on the phone; he'd say, as I think I mentioned, "If you'd called me I could have told you what the situation was." Well, what he was saying was: "If you'd called me, [I could have told you] what I was thinking on it." If I called you I know what you would have done, you'd have tried to throw down the story. You wouldn't have confirmed it so I had to get it someplace else. And I had that happen. But he wanted the best possible image of himself and what he was doing for pure reasons of human nature. Everybody does. But he wasted too much of his time trying to fight the system of checking back on everything that was ever written about him. If he had wanted that done he should have left it to

somebody else. That became even more important when he was president. My God, three newstickers in the Oval Office! Watching [them], that's time consuming, it really is. I do it myself now right here on AP; it's time consuming if you try to ride herd and know what's going on.

G: The image of him that we have, or one of the images here, with regard to the press is that if a reporter writes an article about him that's 90 per cent favorable and may contain a half a paragraph that might be construed as criticism, Johnson would home in on that one part. Did he ever do that with you?

T: Oh, yes. He was hypersensitive about stories written about him or about projects that he was responsible for.

G: Can you recall a particular example?

T: Well, two little incidents that involved the one time [I was at the Ranch]. As I say, I was not covering the White House during his presidency until the last few months. But having covered him from the time he was a member of the House, through the Senate and the vice presidency, I had never been to the Ranch. I wanted to have a look at it. So one week in December, 1966, I arranged to fill in for Merriman Smith when Johnson was going to be at the Ranch before Christmas for about two weeks. I went down, Helen Thomas and I. Joe Laitin was there. Bill Moyers was there. Joe was the assistant press secretary. Joe arranged for me to go out this Saturday morning to the Ranch. There was going to be a space shot and Johnson was going to view the shot on the television in his office, in the study. Bob Semple [Robert B. Semple, Jr.], who was then a new Washington

reporter for the New York Times drew the assignment. Nobody else really wanted else really wanted to waste a Saturday morning to go out to the Ranch for this routine thing. It meant taking the whole Saturday morning. So Bob Semple went as a pool reporter and I went along as a guest of Johnson's, arranged through Joe Laitin.

We got out there and we were ushered in, saw the space shot. Johnson made the usual phone call to congratulate the astronauts on the successful launch and so on. He did something else, I don't remember what it was, he said something or did something else, a minor thing, just a very unimportant little part of the story. I was making notes just for my own later use. Bob Semple was making his notes to phone in a pool report for all the other reporters down in Austin. Joe Laitin was there. So when it's over--I had written an overnight story, a routine story, speculating on something that it was thought that Johnson might do. I got the information from Joe Laitin. It was a speculative story. Well, when Johnson greeted me on arrival out there, he said, "I see Bill Theis knows what the President of the United States is going to do on such and such." He couldn't let that opportunity go by to let me know that he didn't like the story. So our relationship was fine.

But on the way back we go back into Johnson City to get a sandwich before going back to Austin. That's the first place from which Bob Semple can telephone in to the press center his pool report, not a news story, but a pool report, so all the other reporters can have it. We're having our sandwich and we're back in the wire car

starting back toward Austin, Joe Laitin riding in the front seat with the driver, and Semple and I in the back seat. We're gone a couple of miles out of Johnson City, the phone rings in the car. Joe gets the phone up close, says, "Yes. No, sir. Yes. No, sir." This conversation is obviously Johnson. Now what was happening, we found out when he hung up the phone. Johnson had already been told what was in [the pool report]. He had had that pool report read back to him from Austin and was already on the phone to the wire car complaining about this detail which Semple had put in his pool report. He wanted to try to get it stopped before all the other reporters got the pool report that went into everybody's story. It was something totally inconsequential. I told Semple--he was startled--I said, "Look, Bob, pay no attention to it. I was there. Joe was there. That's the way it happened. Don't change a word in the pool report." And we didn't. It was some unimportant detail, something Johnson had said or done. I don't recall now what it was, which he may not have realized he did or said at the time. But it was in my notes; it was in Semple's notes, a small example of that kind of thing. You know, to follow up and make sure that--[it's] almost incredible for a president to be [that concerned]. When he's down there on a vacation it was a little more logical, but when he's in the Oval Office with all the responsibility he has, it was hard to comprehend. But that's the way he was built. Those are really minor deficiencies obviously. They are minor flaws, if they are real flaws, certainly not to be exaggerated in the retelling.

G: Is there anything else that you [want to talk about]?

T: These were just mainly little things like that, anecdotal things.

No, I don't think so. Anything else would be things you would have gotten from other sources. It would be duplication.

G: Have we covered those anecdotes?

T: Yes.

G: Okay.

Well, I certainly do thank you.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of J. William Theis

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, J. William Theis of Washington, D.C. do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recording and transcript of the personal interview conducted on December 1, 1977 in Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

J. William Theis
Donor

October 26, 1981
Date

Archivist of the United States

November 18, 1981
Date