INTERVIEWEE: BASCOM TIMMONS

INTERVIEWER: DOROTHY PIERCE McSWEENY

March 6, 1969

M: This interview is with Bascom Nolly Timmons, columnist. Today is Thursday, March 6, 1969. It's 3:30 in the afternoon. And this is the anniversary of the fall of the Alamo, too, I just realized. We are in Mr. Timmons' offices in the National Press Building, Room 1253. My name is Dorothy Pierce McSweeny.

Mr. Timmons, to begin this interview, I would like to give a very brief background on your very long journalistic career. You began as a reporter for the Fort Worth Record--

T: Fort Worth Record in 1906, I was 16 years old.

M: 1906, right. And in 1912-1913 you came to Washington and worked for the Washington Post. You have been an editor and owner of newspapers. In 1917 you became the Washington correspondent for the Houston Chronicle and the Tulsa World. Since then you've added papers just throughout Texas and have been really a regular fare for many of us over many, many years. You've also added papers in the South and in the Midwest.

About how many papers are your columns carried in now, sir?

T: Twenty-two. I only send columns to the papers that I send news to.

M: How often do you write a column, as opposed to sending news dispatches?

T: Until recently about three times a week; but right now for personal reasons, the illness of my wife, I haven't been keeping up with them so much. The column goes out everyday. Other people write it sometimes but not in my name of course.

M: Away back in 1906, how did you happen to choose newspapering as a career?

T: I was in school, and I solved a murder up at Amarillo. The paper offered me a job and I quit school and went down there and took it. I have no college education. I went to work on a newspaper and grew up in ignorance.

M: Just to depart briefly, what was this murder that you solved?

T: A boy was found that had been murdered and I helped the chief of police solve it. The fact is that I figured the way that it happened, and it did happen that way. Even then I was writing for a little newspaper down in Amarillo after school and things like that. Fort Worth offered me a job because of the Dockrey--it was called the Dockrey Murder Case and it was a famous case out there in that part of the country, and what I did on it caused them to ask me to come down and go to work. They thought I was a great deal older than I was.

M: What was the name of the case?

T: Dockrey, D-O-C-K-R-E-Y.

M: Mr. Timmons, since 1917 you've been pretty much continuously on the Washington scene.

T: Yes.

M: Have you had any disruptions through this period, of not being up here?

T: Since 1917, no. We had to put in a little while in the Army--about six months in the Army, the first World War.

M: Mr. Timmons, you are also an author of three biographies on Charles Dawes, Jesse H. Jones and my very favorite, John Garner of Texas, which does a good deal of chronicling not only the national political scene but Texas politics, too. Would you tell me when you first began hearing about the name or the man, Lyndon Johnson, and in what connection?

T: When Representative [Richard] Kleberg had been elected to Congress in

Texas it was a special election. And on Kleberg's election--there had been a Republican in the San Antonio district, [Harry] Wurzbach was his name, and whether Garner or Snell of New York was elected Speaker depended on the outcome in Texas. It could have depended on it--there were two or three races in other states. Before Kleberg was elected I got the election call because the Houston Chronicle editor was state chairman in Texas and I got him to have the Governor call the election. Kleberg was elected as a Democrat. Garner was afraid the Republican was going to be elected, but the Republican didn't have any chance in the race. Kleberg was elected against a San Antonio man named Wright.

Then I heard of Johnson from Kleberg. Kleberg was talking about who he was going to appoint as his secretary. Because of the Depression he had a thousand applications, it looked like--a terrible bunch of applications. I talked with Roy Miller. Do you know who Roy Miller is? His son is Dale Miller.

M: The name is very familiar to me.

T: Do you know Dale Miller?

M: Again I can't place it.

T: He's here in Washington, a very close friend of Johnson's. Roy Miller was a very close friend of Kleberg's. Kleberg had these applications, and he said he had a long-legged school teacher in Houston that he liked best of any of them, referring to Johnson. He was teaching school in Houston, my recollection is.

My recollection is going to be bad on some of these things because it's a long time ago.

I didn't know anything about it. Miller was anxious that he appoint Johnson, and he did appoint Johnson and brought him up here. That's the

way I remember it. That's the first time I ever heard his name, was when Kleberg was talking about getting a secretary.

M: Do you know what had persuaded Representative Kleberg to select Mr. Johnson? Was it Miller's recommendation?

T: It had a great deal to do with it. But as Kleberg said himself, he liked the letter he wrote or the conversation he had had with him--I think it had only been a letter--better than the rest of them.

M: Do you recall when you first met Mr. Johnson?

T: I'd say in the early autumn of 1931.

M: What were the circumstances?

T: He was in Kleberg's office and I went up there. I used to go to the Capitol some. The reason I didn't have closer association with Johnson was that a young man in my office named Edward Jamison--covered the House of Representatives for me. I only went up there when I had something to do. You see, I have had all these papers all this time and I had a lot of office work. I used to go to the Capitol only when I had something special to do. Johnson and Jamison became very close friends. Johnson was a great news sourse--full of news for his Congressman.

M: Do you recall what the occasion was when you happened to be up there the first time?

T: No, just a routine news matter that time. I just went in to see Kleberg in his office. He asked me to come over. They had it quite fixed up. It was quite a Texas atmosphere. Johnson had done most of that. Johnson was a bachelor, of course at that time.

M: Did you have any first impressions of Mr. Johnson when you met him?

T: He seemed to be very busy. He seemed to be a very hard worker--that was an impression I've had--all his life. He was a very hard worker. He

didn't waste much time, he was doing something all the time.

M: Did he pay any special attention to the fact that you were a newspaperman?

T: Yes, I think he did because I had been here a long time. You see, my name has been in the Texas papers longer than any person I suppose that ever lived--I don't know--back to 1917 regularly.

M: Mr. Timmons, Texas has produced during the 1900's three very famous political figures, all of which you have seen more or less begin, mature to some very great political careers, and also come to an end in their political careers. Of course, I'm speaking of Mr. Garner, Mr. Rayburn, and Mr. Johnson. Would you tell me if over this time you drew any comparisons or saw many similarities or differences between these three men and their public careers?

T: They were all different, all very intelligent men. Garner, I knew first. Rayburn, I knew from before--I was here before Rayburn came to town. I came to town in July; Rayburn came the next March. The presidential term used to begin on the 4th of March. Garner was a specialist on financial matters on the Ways and Means Committee. Rayburn was on the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee and was interested in all kinds of legislation that came before that committee. It had wide jurisdiction. Garner was well established when I came here, and Rayburn came after I did, and Johnson came to town earlier in his life than the others did. I don't know how old he was when he came here.

M: He wouldn't have been very old, in his early 30's.

T: It doesn't seem to me like he was 30, but he couldn't have been any older than that.

M: The first time I don't believe he was, as a representative. I was thinking of when he entered the House.

T: I'll tell you about when he became representative when we get to that period. After he left Kleberg, he worked for awhile up at the Capitol at the door of the House of Representatives. Then he went to Texas on the Youth Administration. Then he came back here as a representative, and when he got elected down there he got on the train in Austin, Roosevelt's train. Roosevelt had been in Texas--had been on a fishing trip down in Corpus--and he came through Austin. Johnson had had--a new representative that had just come into office--had had an attack of appendicitis, and he looked to me like when he got on the train he was going to die. He shouldn't have gotten up, but he wanted to join Roosevelt on the train. I don't know if he knew Roosevelt before that time or not. The reason I remember the trip so well was it was a long train and we had compartments. Each person had a compartment and I had a single occupancy compartment. He came and got in my room because I was by myself, and I had a place up there where he could lie down. He lay down after he went back to see Roosevelt. He stayed with Roosevelt until we got to Dallas or Fort Worth, wherever the trip ended, for a day or two, and then we came on up there. Roosevelt at the time had a son, Elliott, who lived in Fort Worth, and Roosevelt stayed down there a couple of days visiting.

A comparison of the three men, they were a different three men and similar too. They were all hard-working, able people, people that understood what they were doing. But, as I say, Johnson started in his capacity up there as a secretary and Garner had been well established in Congress when I came here. So it's pretty hard to tell my early impressions because they were in different positions.

M: Do you recall on that train trip anything that Mr. Johnson talked about?

T: He talked about his race. He had won a race down there and he talked

about the [Supreme] Court. He was for the enlargement of the [Supreme] Court, which didn't happen. Roosevelt wanted to enlarge the Supreme Court. He talked about how much he was looking forward to his service in Congress. He was starting pretty early with his relationship with Roosevelt. He already had a delegation. He talked about that and specific things I can't think of.

M: That was a long time back.

T: Yes.

M: Do you recall anything most strongly about Mr. Johnson's years in the House from 1937 to 1949?

T: He was very much interested in military affairs. He was on the Navy Committee. He used to come up to my office quite often because he used to come here and meet Jamison, and they would go out together. They were about the same age. Jamison hasn't been living for some years. His wife was at the White House--during the Johnson Administration his wife was up there, his widow.

You asked me--?

M: Anything that stood out in your mind about Mr. Johnson during his representative years.

T: How he went on that committee and how he tackled his job and soon mastered it and how the chairman of the committee, who'd been there for years, Vinson--in fact he served in Congress longer than anybody ever did, fifty years in the House of Representatives. He began to give Johnson a lot of things to do because Johnson was very thorough in what he did. During that time war had broken out in Europe, and we had begun to prepare for war. He was very busy, just like he's always been very busy since I've known him.

M: Let me just ask you some rather general questions. About how many times

do you think Mr. Johnson figured in your Texas columns and Texas news stories.

T: Oh, very frequently--in the news stories principally. I'd say he figured certainly weekly and sometimes almost daily in the news stories.

M: Did Mr. Johnson cooperate, either with Mr. Jamison or yourself so that he did get that much publicity?

T: Very strongly with Jamison. As I say, his relation was very strong with Jamison, as I was doing a lot of other things. He and Jamison were very close friends.

M: Did Mr. Jamison get any sort of inside tips or exclusive type news from Mr. Johnson?

T: Yes. I mailed a letter out to Jamison's wife the other day that I found from Johnson--I've been getting rid of my files. It's a heart-breaking job to throw things away that have been around for years, but I wanted to get rid of them, except some which I'm giving to the University of Wisconsin. I found quite a good deal of correspondence and ran onto this story where he'd thank you when he thought it was well handled. Sometimes he thought it wasn't well handled; he'd say so then, too.

M: What do you think has been the biggest reason for Mr. Johnson's continued return to public office from Texas, which is kind of known for having chaotic politics?

T: He looked after the interests of the State. In addition to the things he was doing on the national scale, he was always on the job with the state in his district--or when he went to the Senate, for the whole state. Even before he went to the Senate he was very much interested in anything for Texas.

M: Did Mr. Johnson particularly beat out the other congressmen in his delegation

as far as news items or patronage or federal money projects?

T: Of course, he got that great big Colorado River thing, the biggest thing that the State had ever had up to that time. He got certainly as much, and probably more, than any of them. And on the news, he was in the news more than any of his colleagues at that time.

M: Did he hold press conferences particularly?

T: After he went in the Senate he did--not in the House.

M: How would you rate Mr. Johnson as a congressman?

T: How would I rate him? I'd rate him very highly as a congressman.

M: Was Mr. Johnson very close to Mr. Garner?

T: They weren't so close, but Mr. Garner had a very high opinion of him. He was closer to Roosevelt than he was to anybody; he got very close to Roosevelt. When Garner ran for President [the Democratic nomination in 1940 and when Roosevelt was finally nominated, Johnson was for Garner. But he knew that Roosevelt was going to be nominated, we all knew that. Garner had gotten in the race when he didn't think Roosevelt was going to run for a third term.

M: Do you recall thinking back there in his early congressional years that he had a possibly long political career ahead of him?

T: I never had any doubt about it from the time he got in Congress that he'd be here a long time, as long as he wanted to be.

M: Were there any characteristics which you saw indicative of this long success and his eventual ascendancy to Presidency?

T: He kept in touch with his people, his constituents, worked hard bringing projects--projects that meant a great deal to his district--and he was very successful in getting those things. It's awfully hard to beat a man when he gets in and does his job, especially in Texas. As you say,

they change, but they don't change from somebody that's doing his job.

M: Do you recall very many occasions of seeing Mr. Johnson during his congressional years? I know you said you didn't have that much contact--

T: I saw him very often. He used to come here to this office. He used to go up to the National Press Club and I'd see him around the Capitol when I'd go up there. But when you have seen just thousands and thousands of members of Congress and people up there, it's pretty hard to--I didn't think he was going to be President. I didn't think anybody from Texas was going to be President. I mean, I didn't think so until after he got to the Senate--then I thought he had a good chance to be President some day.

M: He became a Senator in 1949, Minority Leader in '53 and Majority Leader in '55. Had Mr. Johnson established a pretty good rapport with the press during this time?

T: Very good. He was a genius at getting acquainted with people.

M: And as a senator, did you see him more specifically on news?

T: Yes. I saw him oftener after he went to the Senate.

M: Do you recall any of these? Do they stand out strongly in mind, either on what the issue was or what Mr. Johnson's position was on them?

T: No, I can't. I'm not being much help to you.

M: That's all right, you're doing fine. We're still a pretty long way back. What about on the McCarthy hearings?

T: Of course, he worked out the planning of the censuring himself, how it would be. He had it worked out with other people, but he himself originated the plan--as I always understood it. He wasn't on the McCarthy Committee, was he? No, Watkins was always chairman of it.

M: Do you recall him talking about those at all?

T: He didn't talk a great deal about them, not to me. He would just say,

"The Committee is handling this matter." He didn't want to step on the committee's toes in any way.

M: Do you recall any of the events or a meeting that sort of typified the power and influence thathe had in the Senate?

T: I just know he had a dozen balls in the air at one time, and he had full understanding of all of them. I've known Leaders starting 'way, 'way, 'way back, and he undoubtedly was the most active and handled more legislation than any of them handled before.

M: Did he, during this period, give you any really good news item that really was a success?

T: He got at that time where he felt like in fairness he had to talk to everybody, and he wasn't giving you many inside, exclusive stories, because he was in a position where if he had given me a story--he gave his stories out all at the same time then. Oh, he would give you a tip on something if you'd run into him, but he had come that far along in his leadership that he had to treat everybody fairly, treat everybody the same.

M: What did you think of his cooperation with Eisenhower?

T: He was a Democrat and Eisenhower was a Republican. From the time he came in the Democrats controlled Congress, and Eisenhower was Republican, and I thought he was statesmanlike.

M: Was this of any political help for him in hiw own state where Shivers had gone for the Dixiecrats?

T: Eisenhower had carried Texas. Eisenhower was a very popular figure in Texas, a native of Texas--only there a little in his infancy, but he was Texas-born. Eisenhower was popular in Texas and I think it helped him in Texas.

M: Did he and Rayburn pretty much control the party machinery in the State?

T: I think so, yes. Johnson more than Rayburn. Rayburn was always sort of a district man. Johnson thought more statewide than Rayburn did, although Rayburn was, you must say, his leader.

M: In thinking back about meetings that you might have had, either casual or social or anything else, with Mr. Johnson, do you recall what seemed to be uppermost in his mind, either what he was worried about or most concerned about, both during his House and Senate days?

T: No, he covered a wide range of national matters. Yes, I think he was very much troubled about the state of preparedness of the country just before the war. We'd let our Army and Navy and everything go 'way down, and he was very interested in building it up. And they did. Of course, it was a mighty effort we made after we got in. I think he was as helpful in getting preparedness as anybody in Congress, because he was so active. He'd work long hours and master subjects.

M: Do you recall any stories that you heard about Mr. Johnson during this time--maybe that were favorites of yours, or ones that were favorites of the time?

T: No, I can't think of one.

M: How would you rate Mr. Johnson as a Senator and Majority Leader?

T: I'd rate him as probably the most effective that I've known. There were other very effective leaders, Robinson of Arkansas and Barkley of Kentucky, in earlier days. But I'd rate Johnson as the most effective. You see, every year the country gets bigger and every year the country gets more problems. And they had more problems as he came along than Robinson had or Barkley had had.

M: When did you first hear or think yourself in terms of Mr. Johnson being a possible or a potential presidential candidate?

T: I guess in the '50's, about '54 or '55. And he was a candidate in 1956 in Chicago.

M: As a favorite son?

T: As a favorite son, yes, and he had some other delegates too. He had quite a few other delegates. I don't remember how many.

M: Do you think that was a serious effort on his part then?

T: No, I think he was more interested--he didn't want Stevenson nominated because Stevenson had been nominated and defeated, and I think he wanted to use his delegation and his delegates to bring about the nomination of somebody more likely to be elected.

M: Have you been to most of the conventions, Mr. Timmons?

T: I didn't go this year. I started going to national conventions in 1908 when I was 18 years old. I went to all the conventions until this year. I didn't go to the Republican Convention in 1908. I went to both Democratic and Republican from--I believe I went to 28 or 29. I'd have to look that up. I have to correct that on the record, but I didn't go to either one last year. I didn't want to go to either one. For one thing, I thought the Democratic was going to be a brawl and it was. I thought the Republican was going to be a dull thing, and it was.

With my kind of writing it got harder and harder. When I first started there wasn't any television or radio or anything like that, you know. All that people knew about what happened at conventions was what we wrote. Now you write for a newspaper and it's been on television, and people saw it ten hours before you get it to them in the newspaper.

M: That's true. Do you recall, not necessarily related to Mr. Johnson, but the conventions that stand out in your mind, of the ones you've attended, either Republican or Democrats?

T: The Democratic convention at Chicago in 1912 which nominated Taft and [Theodore] Roosevelt formed a Bull Moose third party ticket which resulted in the election of Wilson--one week; and the next week in Baltimore which nominated Wilson over Champ Clark after 47-48 ballots, a deadlock. I came here from that convention, got a job on the Washington Post on the 4th of July and went to work here on the 4th of July. I actually went to Milwaukee a little while. It may not be in there, but I went to Milwaukee for a while. I went from Texas to Milwaukee. I went from being editor of the Amarillo paper up to Milwaukee.

M: Any of the other conventions?

T: Of course, there was the seventeen-day, 1924 convention in Madison Square Garden in New York which cast 103 ballots before the nomination of John W. Davis. It was deadlocked between William G. MacAdoo and Governor Alfred E. Smith of New York, and they were in session seventeen days and took 103 presidential ballots before they nominated. I remember that one very well.

I remember the Republican nomination, which nominated Willkie over in Philadelphia in 1940, and the 1932 convention which nominated Roosevelt were outstanding conventions.

M: How do you mean outstanding?

T: Exciting. Roosevelt came very near not being nominated. Except for getting the Garner delegates he wouldn't have been nominated. He was just about to start breaking up when Garner threw his delegates to him. Garner had California and Texas.

M: Is there anything in your mind that you can generalize about Democratic conventions and about Republican conventions?

T: Democratic conventions are more exciting and more human than the Republican conventions are. Republicans are more businesslike.

M: Do you see any parallel between Mr. Johnson and Mr. Garner in refusing to campaign for the office of the presidency and then accepting the VP nomination?

T: Well, that was very, very similar. Garner had a majority of only three in the House. That was very close. When it finally got down he was elected by three. And he couldn't have campaigned anyway--he wasn't a campaigner. He didn't even campaign when he was nominated for Vice President. He only made one speech. He worked on the speech and he made it.

Johnson of course was Majority Leader at the time and he had his Congress things to think about, and I suppose he didn't want to campaign. He had a situation where he could hardly get away from here and campaign anyhow.

M: What do you think held back Mr. Johnson most in more strongly seeking the nomination?

T: In 1960?

M: Even in 1956 if you want to go back.

T: He didn't have much chance, really, in 1956 to be nominated himself. He had a chance to control the nomination maybe--help control the nomination. But it was soon pretty evident that the convention was going to nominate Stevenson again. Regardless of what anybody did, they were going to nominate him again.

M: And in '60?

T: In '60, of course, I think Kennedy had done a lot of campaigning and had a lot of delegates. Again, it was a question of he just had the delegates when he got to Los Angeles.

M: What were the feelings in Texas both about [Johnson] running for President

and then accepting the Vice Presidency?

T: Texas was pretty much against Kennedy at the time, you know. And Johnson's accepting the nomination wasn't a very popular thing. Some of his people felt terrible about it.

Rayburn did, too. Rayburn told me, "He'll never take it. If he takes the Vice Presidency--if he takes it, he'll take it over my dead body." But then Rayburn changed his mind later in the day.

M: Did you have very many occasions to see Mr. Johnson during his Vice Presidency?

T: Quite often.

M: Could you tell me a little bit about some of them?

T: Well, I'd go up and talk to him, and he'd talk to me very frankly. I'd use my judgment about what I wanted to print about almost everything.

M: Did you think there was a possibility of his running finally in 1968 for the Presidency?

T: I never thought there was the slightest doubt he'd run again. I was very, very much surprised.

M: I meant if Mr. Kennedy had not been assassinated--this is during his Vice Presidency--did you think he would continue on--

T: I figured that he would serve eight years as Vice President and probably be nominated, although there's always a question of whether Bobby Kennedy wasn't going to be a candidate and whether the Kennedy name wasn't going to carry right on.

M: Did you think it might?

T: I thought it might, yes. Texas is a--well it's west-south. It's still the South, and you don't figure the South getting a candidate. It's figured to be in the Democratic column, anyway. Of course they didn't carry all of the state, but you'd think a party would go for the candidate

from some big powerful state, New York, Ohio, Illinois, something like that.

M: Did you feel, in the times that you saw him as Vice President, that he felt much frustration from that position?

T: I think anybody's frustrated as Vice President. You can talk all you want to about giving a Vice President a lot of duties, [but] he has no power, no constitutional power except to preside over the Senate and cast a vote in case of a tie. He can't, for instance, be head of an agency, and sign his name to something. He can act for the President. It's frustrating, especially for a man who'd been a leader and running the Senate like Johnson had, to be up around the Senate and not have the power.

M: Did he ever say anything to you about it?

T: No, he never talked about not having any power.

M: Do you think he felt, when he first became Vice President, that he would somehow maintain control over the Senate?

T: Probably he did have some control over the Senate. The same thing happened to Garner when Robinson was leader. You don't want to step on the toes of the Majority Leader. I think he exercised power by the fact that people knew that he was able and knew what was going on and his advice was good on things. But I don't think he interfered with Mansfield's leadership any.

M: Did he ever mention any bad relations between his staff and President Kennedy's staff?

T: No, he never did to me. You felt like the people up there were maybe not treating him--but he didn't openly express any.

M: Were you by any chance on that swing through Texas in 1963 when Mr. Kennedy was assassinated?

T: No, I sent two people, Mr. Hillburn and Mr. McKaye, and they were with

him. They were on the trip.

M: Did you talk to him immediately or soon after the assassination?

T: Once, soon after the assassination.

M: What was on his mind?

T: It was a big job; it's a pretty awesome thing. But I don't think he was scared of it. He was thinking about how best to do a good job.

M: Did he call you in or did you go?

T: I went to a press conference and saw him after the conference. And during his Administration I didn't see him so much because I wasn't so active as I used to be.

M: Do you think he felt any concern over how the state might go in the 1964 election--Texas?

T: In '64?

M: Yes.

T: No, not the slightest. Oh, he knew he was going to win big. He knew he was going to win big nearly everywhere in '64 against Goldwater.

M: Of course, I think the only threat from Goldwater was in the South, though, in some big conservative areas.

T: Goldwater would have beaten Kennedy in Texas.

M: You think so?

T: Yes, but after Johnson got in, there was not a chance. He figured Goldwater was going to get quite a vote, but not enough to imperil his chances.

M: Did he give you any exclusives or tips, either attributable or not attributable during his Presidency?

T: No.

M: Did he ever in what is called in newspaper terminology "float any trial balloons" with you?

T: When he was a senator he might have in some of our stories and other people's stories. He might have been throwing up some balloons to find out what the sentiment was on a subject, but I don't think of any. I'm being the least help to you of anybody you ever talked to!

M: No, you aren't.

Do you recall ever writing something about Mr. Johnson, or writing something from a press conference with Mr. Johnson, that turned out to be not what happened?

T: I thought he was going to be defeated when he ran for the Senate and he fooled me there. Of course, it was pretty close. But I can't think of anything I ever wrote that was far from the mark.

M: Mr. Timmons, I'd like to ask you some questions just from the point of view of your being a long-standing newspaperman. I'm sure, as you're aware, after the '64 elections his standing was extremely high.

T: Yes.

M: And of course it was when just a flood of legislation got through Congress in both '64 and '65. But beginning about 1966 opinion began to turn against him and gradually criticism reached a very high and, really, very vicious level. Why do you think this happened?

T: I think it was partly his fault. Maybe a good deal of it was his fault. I don't think Johnson communicated with the people well. He just did so many things--it would all be wrapped up--like it was in the Senate. It's fine up in the Senate to have things all wrapped up before you do them, but if he'd had some leaks on one thing and another he'd have been better off, I think, than to have everything accomplished before letting anybody know it. And as people would say, he wouldn't make an appointment because it had been mentioned in the paper that he might appoint this man. Then

he'd turn around and not do it because it had been leaked out, and somebody got hold of the information.

And because the war came on. It's a war 'way over--10,000 miles--in a country nobody ever heard of before we got into it. Nobody had ever heard of Viet Nam. They knew it was part of Indochina at one time, but nobody had ever heard anything about it. I think part of his trouble was the war. Anyway you'd have gone, anything you'd have done was wrong with someone, half the people. Then the war went on and on and on and there looked like no way of getting out of it.

But I do think he just wasn't able to communicate like some other Presidents--like Wilson and some did. That's what I think.

M: Do you think that this led to what is called the "credibility gap?"

T: Partly. Of course, there were credibility gaps. I think he's a man who told the truth, and I think--well, he would say some things that would be done differently.

M: Why do you suppose he did this?

T: The circumstances changed, and maybe he was misunderstood. As I say, he didn't communicate very well.

M: Do you think that he, in attempting to have people see him and what he did in the right light, ever sort of determined how it would be presented, even if it wasn't exactly the way it happened?

T: I've heard other people say that but I never had any instances of it. Some people said he had an ancestor at the Alamo, and of course they made a lot of that. You know about that, don't you? Then he made a joke out of it. He said he was talking about the Alamo, a saloon at Laredo, Texas. Something like that.

M: I never heard that one before.

What do you think caused the members of the press to become so strident in their criticism?

T: I think after he got to be President he tried to--they all try to control news--they didn't write what he wanted. I think he wanted to control the way they wrote it. And you've got to face the fact that the press was full of people that just couldn't see anybody President after Kennedy. They didn't know anybody had been President before Kennedy and couldn't conceive of anyone after Kennedy. I say that in all kindness, but this town was full of Kennedy people, you know--news people.

M: Do you think that possibly Mr. Johnson gave too much access to the press, or tried too hard to what they say, "court them?"

T: He may have. He was very anxious to have the people that wrote that had quite a lot of influence, Lippmann and people like that. I think he courted them too much at the start, and then they fell out. I think he gave great weight to what was said in the eastern newspapers, the New York Times and Washington Post and Baltimore Sun. Those are the papers that are read in this town. I think he gave a great deal of attention to the people who represented those newspapers.

M: Any lack of attention to say papers in the South or Southwest?

T: Maybe not intentional, but I think he did neglect the papers. I think he probably did, yes.

M: Did you have any dealings with his press secretaries?

T: Yes.

M: What was your assessment of them--Mr. Reedy, Mr. Moyers, Mr. Christian?

T: Christian was the most capable one of the bunch; Moyers, of course--Moyers was pretty keen about Moyers. Christian was by far the ablest, the most useful to him.

M: How much responsibility do you think it is of the press secretaries regarding the President's public image?

T: He represents the President, and he's on the President's side, and he wants to present--well, it's his job to get out the news the way the President wants it, I mean the timing--

M: And if it doesn't come out right, is it his responsibility, too, then?

T: Christian, I think, got along very well with the press and with Johnson--better than the other two. Reedy--I've never quite understood him. Christian and Moyers were both from Texas. Reedy was from up here, I'm ashamed of myself that I'm not telling you more.

M: It's fine. Have you read some of the books that have been written about Mr. Johnson, sir?

T: Yes, some of them.

M: Just to name a few, William White's biography, The Professional; Evans and Novak, The Exercise of Power; Sidey, The Personal Presidency. There are several more, but let me just ask you about any of these that you've read or any I haven't mentioned. How accurate do you think they are in their reading of President Johnson?

T: White's The Professional was very favorable to the President. And the Sidey book--I only looked at parts of it. The Evans and Novak book I thought was not very fair to him, not even a fair book.

M: Did you ever see any examples, or were you yourself the recipient of what's called "The Johnson Treatment"--his great persuasive powers?

T: Johnson was always--I just was throwing away some letters the other day. I didn't throw any away, I just ran into them the other day. He wrote me a letter that he was going to have my birthday made a national holiday and so forth! But he was persuasive.

M: I was trying to recall, what is the date of your birthday? I think I know it.

T: March 31st. He was up to my birthday party on my 70th birthday when I thought I was going to retire and I didn't. That was when he was running in 1960--that was the time Kennedy was nominated.

M: Why don't you read it, sir [the letter] into the tape?

T: "Dear Bascom:" This is July 4, 1966.

"Congratulations on your 50th anniversary day as a Washington correspondent and on maintaining a cub reporter's enthusiasm for a good story. You've dug out the facts and written many, many good ones. And over the years the byline, 'By Bascom N. Timmons,' has come to mean a guarantee of integrity and objectivity that could be a model for all reporters. It's also been a pleasure to have you as a friend and I'm counting on having your company as a friend and as a reporter for many years.

With warm regards,

Lyndon Johnson"

He wrote a lot of letters like that.

Here's another one on my birthday in 1959.

"I think that March 31st should be declared a public holiday both in Washington and in Texas. As the dean of the Washington press corps and as an outstanding Texan, your birthday should get a major celebration. And from me to you go the warmest in birthday congratulations and wishes for many happy returns.

Best regards,

Lyndon"

I got a lot of those letters. Of course, I didn't keep all these letters

but when I was throwing these things away the other day I thought, "Well, I won't throw these away."

M: No, I'm sure they'd like to have them.

Let me ask you another question along the lines of Mr. Johnson's personality. Did you ever see or have any contact with Mr. Johnson's temper? He's supposed to have a very strong, very violent temper.

T: He got mad at me once in the campaign of 1948 when he defeated Coke Stevenson. He didn't like a story I wrote. I told him I was going to write a story the way I wanted to, and he could do whatever he wanted to do about it, that my only interest was in being fair. And that's about the only so-called run-in I ever had with him.

M: What did you write?

T: It was some statement somebody made about him. I don't exactly remember what it was, except that I remember he didn't like it. He thought I was on Stevenson's side. At that particular time I didn't care who won, Johnson or Stevenson. I'd known Johnson longer, but my Texas papers were about half for Stevenson and half for Johnson, and I was just trying to write the news. It was something I wrote. I don't remember what it was.

M: Did you do any sort of investigating about that '48 election, on its outcome?

T: Well, yes, it was coming up here pretty fast, the Supreme Court--but he never said anything about that. We used to handle his trips he was on. And what happened in the news we didn't comment on; we didn't editorialize. I didn't write anything in the column about it.

M: What did you think had happened in Texas?

T: What happened?

M: As far as the number of votes, and if there was any chicanery.

T: My idea is that there was chicanery on both sides. And in the one four

years before there was undoubtedly chicanery against him--whenever O'Daniel ran.

M: 1941

T: Yes, there was a special election. He probably did a lot better--if he didn't win he probably did a lot better. It was close then. If he did not win he did a lot better than--more people voted for him then were counted.

M: In '41?

T: Yes.

M: You think he sort of learned a lesson from that and applied it in '48?

T: They weren't overlooking anything in 1948 because he figured he had been euchred out of the election four years before. I don't know. Of course, I don't approve of counting the ballots anyway and whatever happened down there in Alice didn't look very good in that little town where those late returns came in from Parr's area down there. It didn't look any too good.

M: Mr. Timmons, what do you think about Mr. Johnson's relations with his Congress during his Presidency?

T: He got more legislation than anybody ever did.

M: Did it sort of decline the last few years, do you think?

T: He got through everything, he got through things that had been talked about and piled up and rejected--he got it through. Of course he didn't get everything he wanted even then. No President ever gets all he wants.

M: Do you think he lost his consensus?

T: I don't think there is any consensus in this country. I don't think there ever was any real consensus. He had wide support, but I don't think he ever had the consensus that people said he had.

M: Do you think Mr. Johnson's background in the House and the Senate

prepared him for his very major role in foreign affairs?

T: Yes, surely.

M: And his handling of Viet Nam, too?

T: I don't know about Viet Nam. That's just an impossible situation. I just don't know how anybody could have done anything. He relied greatly on the Chiefs of Staff because in the Military Affairs Committee he relied on the military men then. He knew they were professional military men, and he wasn't. They're educated for that purpose, and I think in Viet Nam probably he paid more attention to them than he should have, probably. I don't know whether he did or not.

M: I know during some of his presidency they did use to dwell on the fact that he didn't have that much experience in dealing with foreign affairs.

T: I think he's more domestically minded then he was--he knew the domestic scene more than--maybe he didn't understand. I don't think Kennedy understood as much as they said he did.

Of course, Kennedy was a hero because he was assassinated. Kennedy was quite unpopular at the time he was assassinated, I think, but he became a martyr. But I think Kennedy had a kind of grace in dealing with foreign affairs that Johnson didn't have.

M: Were there any areas over the years that you really strongly disagreed with his decisions?

T: Of course, I didn't like a lot of the domestic programs. I thought they cost too much money for what they could accomplish.

M: What did you think of Mr. Robert Kennedy's candidacy in the spring of 1968?

T: I didn't think that he had a chance to win against Johnson. Let's see, he got in in February and Johnson got out in March, didn't he. I won't

say that he didn't have a chance, either, because he might have been nominated for that convention if he had lived. He just might have, I don't know. It's quite a name.

M: Do you think Johnson should have kept on so many of the Kennedy Cabinet men?

T: You inherit a Cabinet and you don't really throw them out. You come into the office and the Cabinet's functioning. I don't know anybody that he should have thrown out for any reason. Rusk--it wouldn't have helped him to get rid of Rusk. It wouldn't have helped him to get rid of McNamara. I think McNamara was overrated, but I don't think it would have helped him any. Getting Cabinet members is not an easy job.

M: Do you think he should have perhaps been more politically partisan during his Presidency?

T: No, I think he was partisan enough. Johnson would have won the election if he had been renominated.

M: You think so?

T: He might have had a rough time in his second term--would have had. He was already having a rough time. But I think if Johnson-Nixon had been the candidates, Johnson would have won. I believe he would have.

M: It's just been said that his political machine, or the Democratic National Committee was not in terribly good shape in the beginning.

T: It wasn't in good shape. It always falls into bad shape when the party's in power because they don't give them anything to do. It all goes to the White House. It was in bad shape. Maybe he could have kept it in better shape. Bailey was not a very good man, and maybe some of his Texas people he relied on--Marvin Watson and those people didn't have enough--Watson wasn't on the committee but he dealt with it very closely--didn't have enough national background.

M: Were you very surprised by his withdrawal on March 31st?

T: I was, yes.

M: Why do you think that he did it?

T: Just the reason he said he did. I thought at the time, and still think, he might not have been as healthy. Johnson always worked so hard. When he had a heart attack when he was senator he was working three times as much as a man ought to work. I asked him, "Are you going to kill yourself or are you going to slow down and do what you have to do, which will be a lot anyway and live longer?"

He said, "I'm going to slow down," and he never did. He can't slow down. I mean in public office he can't. What he can do right now--I don't know how he's getting along down there. I haven't heard, except what I read in the New York Times the other day. He seems to be quite active anyway. Of course his name won't be in the paper as much.

M: Do you think with his really liking and enjoyment of politics and power that this was a very difficult decision for him to make?

T: It's going to be very hard for a man--it's hard for any man--nobody ever left the White House happily. They might have thought they wanted to leave, but when the time comes they would have liked to have stayed a little longer.

I came here during the Taft Administration. Mr. Taft was defeated for re-election. Wilson was broken up, but even out in San Francisco his people were out there trying to get him renominated although he was an invalid.

M: How do you think Mr. Johnson compares with all the Presidents that you have seen and whose administrations you've been through?

T: Well, to compare is a pretty hard thing. When I was young I thought

everything Wilson did was all right. I thought everything Wilson did was wonderful when I first came to town. Then I've usually thought about half a man did was right--and that's a pretty good average--and about half of what he did was wrong. In comparison, Johnson's place in history isn't going to be made for a long time. Roosevelt--whether he'll be ranked the same way--. You see, the people who usually decide who are the great presidents are the liberals and they weren't on Johnson's side. The historians won't be on Johnson's side. Do you think they will?

M: I don't know.

T: My own opinion is that he was a capable President. He got into the war which--I think he was the hardest working of all the Presidents. That I'm sure of. He's the hardest working President that's ever been--since I've been here.

M: With all the very liberal legislation that he has passed, why do you think that he never quite got along with the very liberal and very intellectual elements in our society?

T: Well, we Texans don't rate high in the East, do we? In some way they don't like the way we do things.

M: Do you think it was his personality, his accent, his mannerisms?

T: I think so. Of course, I think that was it. If Johnson would talk on the radio like he talked to you in his office, but he couldn't do it. He was like a minister of the Christian Church, you know. I haven't anything against the Christian Church, or any other church, but I mean he talks in that--I don't know what you call--

M: I don't want to give you an adjective, it's be mine. Did you go to the White House many times socially during the Johnson Administration?

T: I haven't been to the White House much socially since the Roosevelt Administration. My wife is ill.

M: I really have just one more question I want to ask you, and I'd like to have you think back to when you first met Mr. Johnson in his early career, the man himself, as he was then and as he is now--or was during the Presidency. Did you see many changes in him?

T: He grew in his mannerisms. I think he was himself just like he was when he first came here. I can't think of any great changes. He was in his 30's when I first met him--late 20's or early 30's--and a man of 60 when he went away from here. No, I can't think of any changes except natural changes.

M: Did you have many occasions to meet Mrs. Johnson and the girls?

T: Not the girls but Mrs. Johnson a great deal. I'm very fond of Mrs. Johnson. I think she got along better than he did.

M: What do you think her contribution was to her husband's Presidency, to him?

T: I think she was a woman of good judgment. I think she advised him, probably more than any woman advised. I think she probably understood national affairs more than any President's wife, except maybe Mrs. Woodrow Wilson--the second Mrs. Woodrow Wilson--may have.

M: Do you think she had a pretty strong influence over him?

T: Yes, she did, yes. She'd say she didn't, but I think she did.

M: Mr. Timmons, I don't have any further questions. Do you have any further comments over anything in Mr. Johnson's career.

T: No. I'm very disappointed in what I've been able to--it'd be the same thing if you came in to talk to me of any man that's been in office since I'be been here. There's been so many of them. I've watched them. Naturally I watched him closer than most because he's from my state. And when he did begin to come up in national affairs--I expect maybe I watched Garner as much. You see my papers are outside of Texas, too. I represent

papers in other states and I have known so many people, it's pretty hard to--. If I'd been with some people I could tell you a lot more anecdotes and things about Johnson. Johnson was always a busy fellow and not a fellow that I visited with as much as I did with a lot of other people. In fact in recent years he hasn't visited with anybody much as he used to. At one time you could go in and talk to the man for three hours, but he got to where he didn't have the time.

When I came here, it cost less than a billion dollars a year to run the government. It was small. I don't think they ever spent over three or four billion dollars except in the Civil War and Spanish-American War up to the Roosevelt Administration. The town of course got bigger. No, I don't think of anything that I have to add.

M: Let me just ask you, since you represent papers in the South and Texas, how do you think Mr. Johnson has been received in those areas as he grew?

T: He went over very high everywhere in the Presidency. I think Johnson will be rated a lot higher than he is now. I said awhile ago the liberal people that make up are not only--I think time will do a lot of things. I think he'll be rated a lot higher than he is now. I think he went out of office at his lowest point.

M: I think that is probably true.

T: I mean there was certainly the period from the whole year--the year 1968 was his low year. Now whether he went up again after he said he wasn't going to run I don't know. But a lot of newspapermen in this town you go to have very definite ideas about everything. I'm not so sure of things as I used to be, and I think you found out. And I can't think of anything else.

M: I want to think you very much, Mr. Timmons. It's been very enjoyable.

[End of Tape]

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