

INTERVIEW II

DATE: October 18, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: JACK VALENTI

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: Mr. Valenti's home in Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

F: This is the second interview with Jack Valenti at his home in Washington on the afternoon of Saturday, October 18, 1969. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

Jack, I suppose we may as well be informal on this. Let's talk a little bit about that Texas trip which saw Jack Kennedy assassinated. Did Vice President Johnson ever discuss with you the reasons for making the trip; did he seem to want the trip made itself, think it was necessary?

V: As I understood it, the trip was really pretty much against his wishes. I don't think he really wanted Kennedy to come to Texas at that time.

F: It was part of a package to Texas and then to Florida.

V: As I recall the conversations that he had with me, he realized that John Connally as governor would bear the brunt of this visit, and he knew that there were problems between Connally and Yarborough. Also, he wasn't sure this was the time to hold a fund-raiser in Texas. But as I understand it, President Kennedy and some of his staff aides were of the opinion that they ought to go to Texas to mend fences and to raise some money. Some time previous to the trip John Connally came to Washington and in a private meeting with President Kennedy sealed the bargain and the trip was on.

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Of course once the trip was on, the Vice President wanted it to go well. My own particular role was in Houston where I was managing the big dinner there, which was really to celebrate Alvert Thomas. It was the notion of Connally and Johnson and Kennedy that they would tie in Kennedy's trip with the Thomas dinner and that the President and the Vice President would appear at the dinner. So I was busily engaged in making this Thomas dinner a success. I presume Vice President Johnson was interested in making the whole trip a success.

He called me about four days before they were due to come down and wanted me to put together a magazine-program for the Austin dinner. It seems like something had happened and there was no program.

F: Who was advancing for the Kennedys? Was O'Donnell on that?

V: Not O'Donnell. The key Kennedy advance man was Marty Underwood. One of the best advance men for the Secret Service was Ron Pontius.

I began to work on the program. I worked my advertising agency around the clock for two straight nights and days and we completed the program. Meanwhile I was working with the advance men on this dinner.

My first connection with the trip came when the President and the Vice President landed in Houston on their way from San Antonio in the late afternoon of November 21. I spoke to the Vice President briefly and he invited me to join him at his suite

in the Rice Hotel, which I told him that I would do. He wanted to discuss that night's dinner, as well as the Austin affair.

I rode in with Ken O'Donnell. I think Cliff Carter and I rode in with O'Donnell in an automobile. I remember that O'Donnell--and that was the first time I had met him--was pleasantly surprised at the kind of reception. I guess they had mixed emotions about what kind of reception they would receive. There was no question that Houston really turned out, mainly for the President, I think, and the Vice President, but also Mrs. Kennedy was accompanying the President and that was an added fillip.

F: Had you done anything in particular to whip up a crowd, or had it just come naturally?

V: It had really come naturally. We had done the usual thing of trying to make sure that the press knew about it and that they were coming in early, to let out the schools; we had bands organized up and down the place. We had publicized it a great deal with the newspapers. We had spot announcements on the radio.

F: Did you have any difficulty in making your arrangements in the fact that there was this, we'll say alleged feud, although I think it's quite real, between Connally and Yarborough? Could you get both groups to work together on something like this?

V: Yes, there were some problems. There would be some problems, for example, about the motorcade: who would ride in what car. I know that Yarborough, as I recall, didn't want to get in the car with the Vice President and didn't want to get in the car with Connally at the airport and we had some problems there. I also recall that O'Donnell was

aware of this and as we were driving in, he made a cryptic remark that President Kennedy was going to see that Yarborough didn't act this foolishly and that they were going to do something about it, but I wasn't privy to what they did. I do know that Thomas knew about it too and was rather upset about the refusal of Yarborough to ride in that automobile.

I'll jump ahead a little bit by saying that when we got to Fort Worth that night we drove in to the Texas Hotel--we, meaning I was sitting in the front seat and the Vice President and Mrs. Johnson and Yarborough in the back seat of the car. The conversation was amiable and cordial. But there Yarborough did ride with the Vice President at that time.

To go back to Houston now, we drove in. O'Donnell was very pleased with the reception. I guess there must have been a half million people, four and five deep lining the sidewalks. From the airport the normal time is about a twenty-five minute ride.

F: Did you come down the freeway?

V: Came down the freeway. There were a lot of people on the freeway, but once we got off the freeway and moved into downtown Houston it was unbelievable. The crowds were enormous. When we got on Main Street coming to the Rice Hotel, they were literally ten-deep on the curbs. It was the biggest crowd I'd ever seen and I so informed O'Donnell. He seemed to be pleased because, as I say, they were worried about the kind of reception that they would get.

My own recollection is that when we landed there I went up to the floor where the President's party was. Larry O'Brien, Ken O'Donnell were there and I met with them. The first time I'd met O'Brien and

O'Donnell. O'Brien wanted to know how the dinner was coming, and if we had any problems. I told him no, that they were in pretty good shape. That was really all he wanted to know. He was busy on some other things. I reported in and then I left, because my job was to make sure that the Sam Houston Colosseum was in good shape. We were expecting about 3,000 people. We had erected a platform and a rostrum, and in back of the rostrum we had an enclosed area where the President and the Vice President would sit before they went aboard the main table.

I guess it must have been about six o'clock when my wife and I joined the Vice President and Mrs. Johnson in their suite in the Rice Hotel; I think they were on the sixth floor. He was interested in how the dinner was coming and I showed him for the first time the program that we had made for Austin. I've never known whatever happened to those programs, I've never seen them since then.

F: I have one.

V: I sure would like to have one myself for my own personal file.

F: I may have more. If I do, I'll send you any extras I have.

V: We sent them all to Austin.

F: They're nice programs.

V: The reason why I wanted it was because it was done in a total of about fifty hours of straight work and I'm always curious about--

F: You wonder what the child looks like.

V: Yes. At any rate, I presented him one and he was pleased with it, very pleased, because he realized that we had done this in a spasm of work. He asked me generally what the situation was in Houston, and I remonstrated about, as I saw it, that I thought Kennedy was in trouble

in Houston, but I thought this trip would be very helpful and very useful. I told him that we had not had too much trouble. As I said, the only trouble we had was on the motorcade--who would ride in what. As I recall, we also had a problem about the mayor of Houston who at that time wanted to--I think it was Contrere?--be in the car with the President, and we finally arranged for that. I'm not sure how we arranged that. I don't know what car he rode in, come to think of it. But I know that's the usual jostling about who rides in what car. That's always a problem.

At that time the Vice President told me, "Why don't you pack a bag and come with me, fly in my plane to Fort Worth and we can go on to Dallas the next day and then be with me in Austin for the dinner," and then I could fly back to Houston on Saturday morning when they went back to Washington. My wife didn't think much of this idea. We'd just had a baby on October 30 and this was November 21 so she took a dim view of the whole thing. I remember she told me under her breath, "Is this trip necessary?" and I laughed and said, "Well, I'll get a chance to be with the Vice President and I would like that very much."

I think she went home and packed a bag for me for two nights' clothing and brought it back to the hotel because in the meanwhile I was going forward with our plans. I remember that the Vice President and the President were going to a LULAC, which was a Latin-American union affair on the mezzanine of the Rice where the President and the Vice President and Mrs. Kennedy were going to speak. I remember Mrs. Kennedy made a little short speech in Spanish. And then they were due over to the colosseum about 9 o'clock. I saw them through the LULAC thing and then I raced back to the colosseum to make sure all was in order.

We had arranged on the Bagby Street side for them to come in a side entrance to the colosseum and we would take them back into the enclosure where they were.

Up to this point, I had never met President Kennedy. I saw him of course at the airport, but that was the end of it. I remember that the Vice President, when they arrived, asked me to come back, he wanted me to meet President Kennedy. He introduced me to the President and said that I was sort of responsible for the crowd, which I wasn't but I didn't deny it. I remember President Kennedy saying to me that he was very grateful and he said, "Maybe I ought to take you along wherever I'm unsure of my reception. I'd like to have you along doing the advancing." Then he introduced me to his wife. She was sitting in a big red chair there and I murmured, "How do you do," and saw Mrs. Johnson again.

Then I went back to the main part of the colosseum to sort of stage manage the affair. By this time there had been some other speeches and Albert had said a few words and introduced all the people there, the governor and a number of congressmen--Congressmen Gonzalez and Brooks and Thomas and Thornberry, as I recall, were there, and a number of congressmen on the trip. Congressman Thomas had flown to San Antonio and came in with President Kennedy on his plane.

Then they all filed in to a big ovation. I stood behind the rostrum on a lower level so that I was invisible to the crowd but I could see all of those at the head table and I must have been no more than a foot and a half away from the main speaker's platform, so that I could be there to see that anything got done. I remember one of the things that I had already said before to somebody, that President Kennedy got

up to speak and I watched his hands. His hands trembled as he spoke. It was kind of an interesting thing to me to watch this, because it was curious that a man so used to making speeches, his hands were shaking as he held these cards. The speeches were on large index cards, not three by five but looked like four by sevens, in large typewriter type, the kind that we used for President Johnson later on. He would read one card at a time. But the ovation was very good. All in all, it had to be accounted a very spectacular trip. Thomas was beside himself with joy. It was really an enormously successful affair.

The presidential party left as soon as the President had spoken. I joined the Vice President in an automobile with Mrs. Johnson and we drove out to the Houston airport. We got aboard.

F: They were in separate planes?

V: Yes. He was in a presidential plane but it was a different plane. So we got aboard this separate plane. We were missing somebody. Somebody's husband didn't get aboard, and I'm always trying to remember in my mind who it was. We had some bad moments there, but we decided that he was already taken care of and that we would go ahead.

We flew into Fort Worth and got there about midnight or 12:30 midnight and landed. I recall that that's when we all piled in the same car, Senator Yarborough, the Vice President and his wife, and myself. They chatted about various things as we went in, nothing of great importance. We went directly to the Texas Hotel and up to the suite that the Vice President had there. I remember that we sat and talked, it was just a small group of us. It was Cliff Carter and Liz Carpenter, the Vice President and Mrs. Johnson and myself, as I recall. We sat and chatted for about forty minutes, I suppose. I don't recall the

Vice President going to see the President, but he may have. I don't remember.

I remember that we did get to bed because we had to get up early for the breakfast the next morning. I'll never forget that the Manchester book said that Johnson at the Texas Hotel was upstairs having a party with his cronies, which was an absolute lie unless you can call sitting around and chatting for about thirty minutes with Liz Carpenter, Cliff Carter and myself as cronies, but it was far from a party. As a matter of fact, it was sort of a recounting of the day's events and we were all sort of reminiscing about it and mentioning little things that had happened. Then after about thirty or forty minutes, we all went to bed.

We got up early the next morning and went down to the mezzanine of the Texas Hotel for the breakfast. The breakfast had been well publicized, there was nothing untoward that happened. I stood over on the side and watched it all and it went very well, and the President and the Vice President were in high good humor.

Then after the breakfast we went across the street to the parking lot where on a specially prepared rostrum Connally and Vice President Johnson and Senator Yarborough and the President all stood, and I think Jim Wright was there too; stood on this platform and President Kennedy made a short speech.

Then we didn't drive to Dallas. We got back into airplanes and we flew to Dallas. From Love Field we got into a motorcade. As I recall, I got into a small bus. Liz Carpenter, Pamela Turnure, Evelyn Lincoln and assorted other presidential aides were there. I would say from the President's standpoint it was a lower level group, but Evelyn Lincoln

was President Kennedy's secretary. Pamela Turnure worked for Mrs. Kennedy. We got aboard this smallish van and we got in the motorcade. I would guess we were twelve or fourteen cars from the front line.

The motorcade went through Dallas, and I recall we were all remarking about how marvelous the reception was. It really was. It was about as big as it was in Houston. There were no hostile faces, not even a hostile sign, which was amazing. But the Dallas reception was extraordinary because we were worried about it. When we got on the airplane we had read in the Dallas paper that ad put out by this fellow Weissman, I believe his name was, really a malignant ad and vicious. So everybody was concerned about what kind of reception we would get. In truth it was without parallel, and very friendly, very warm.

I remember, I couldn't tell you where we were in Dallas, I assume it's that Simmons underpass, that all of a sudden the motorcade began without reason to speed up, tripling the speed, maybe quadrupling it. We attempted to keep up. And we knew something was wrong because all of a sudden we got separated from the cars. And the van driver, at the direction of someone, went directly to the Trade Mart. When we got there, to our amazement, no one else was there. We were by ourselves, it seemed. We got out of the bus and went around to the rear of the Trade Mart where I remember Liz Carpenter got on the phone--I take that back. We got into the rear and into the main hall and found nobody there--Mrs. Lincoln, Turnure, Carpenter and myself and Marie Fehmer.

At that point a fellow with his, I always say in retrospect, shirttail flapping out, raced up and collided with a pay phone, stuck a coin in and began to call frantically and saying, "Where are they, where are they?" We thought: this is very strange.

At that time, while we knew something was wrong, we didn't know what. We walked out of the Trade Mart onto the parking ramp and a fellow was carrying a pocket radio and he told us the President had been shot. At that time we didn't know. And that the Vice President had been shot. Consternation invaded us all at that point. And then we found out on this radio that President Kennedy was at the Parkland Hospital.

At that moment I raced over to a deputy sheriff, told him who we were, and commandeered his car, and all of us piled into this deputy sheriff's car and he raced us to Parkland Hospital. We must have arrived, I don't know--I'd say between 12:30 and 12:45. By this time Mrs. Lincoln is very distraught. I found someone that took us to the administrator's office, and I left them there--Mrs. Lincoln, Liz, and Pamela Turnure, Marie Fehmer, had some coffee brought in--and then I began to try to move around and find out what was going on. I found out that the action was in the basement.

I got down to the basement, how I got down I'll never know. I was stopped about eighteen times, but finally managed to get into the Parkland Hospital basement where I saw--

F: You didn't have much identification beyond just a regular--?

V: That's all. But I managed to convince a policeman guarding the basement door that I belonged there with the Vice President. I got into a room where I saw Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Connally and they were weeping, and that's when I first found out that Governor Connally was seriously injured.

F: And that the Vice President had not been shot.

V: That the Vice President had not been shot, but I did not know where he

was. I didn't see him. Then I milled out in this hallway in the basement which by this time was rather in a state of hysteria. I was standing just outside the door of the emergency room where President Kennedy lay dead though I didn't know it, and I saw Congressmen Gonzalez and Thornberry and Brooks. I remember Congressman Gonzalez or Congressman Brooks was trying to get together some of the governor's clothes.

Then I thought, well, I'd better go upstairs and try to find Liz Carpenter and Marie Fehmer, find out where they were. I got in the stairwell of the hospital between the basement and the first floor. I can't remember whether it was Cliff Carter or a Secret Service man, I think it was Cliff and it could have been a Secret Service man, that grabbed me by the arm and said, "The President is dead, and the Vice President has me looking for you. He wants you to come out to Love Field and get aboard the airplane." That's my first inkling that I was going anywhere.

F: To intrude a moment, why do you think he invited you on the trip in the first place?

V: He wanted me to go on the trip to discuss the Austin dinner and in general to discuss the political situation, just wanted me along. I think for two reasons: one, I think he was grateful for what I had done on the program and he wanted to show his gratitude. As we all know, the President is a very sentimental man and feels drawn to people close to him. Since I had married Mary Margaret I had been drawn closer in his orbit, and he knew that he could count on me.

F: You kind of had a nephew or son-in-law status in a way?

V: That's right. So I don't think it was any more than that. Also, he

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wanted to get my judgment of what was going on in Harris County. But mainly I think he just wanted me there, and since I had done the program this was a way of saying, "I thank you, and come on. Let's go on to the Austin dinner."

At any rate, Cliff Carter and I and, as I recall, Liz Carpenter got outside and commandeered another car, this time a local policeman. We told him who we were and there was a Secret Service man who came with us, because the Secret Service man, I think, was the one who had the orders to bring us aboard. We, again with sirens blasting, raced out to Love Field, showed the credentials of the Secret Service man to the guards because heavy guards had been set up--

[Interruption]

At any rate we got out to Love Field.

F: You didn't have yet a very clear picture of what had happened, did you?

V: No. The only thing we had heard was that the President--of course we knew the President had been shot and he was dead, and that Connally was near death and he was shot. We knew that the Vice President was not shot. At this time we didn't know who shot the President or what it was, whether this was a conspiracy or a coup, or whatever it was. The whole air of those particular moments was one of total confusion, near hysteria, a kind of frantic moving around without knowing why. We were racing out to Love Field, I hadn't the remotest idea why I was going out there or what I was supposed to do, if anything. All I know is that this car took us right to the steps of Air Force One and we climbed aboard, the first time I'd ever been inside the President's

plane. I didn't know anybody aboard. In those days the President's cabin-- the forward part is for staff and the people; midship is the President's office. There were two tables set up, one table with a high-backed chair which was the President's chair and a chair facing it; and then on the other side of the aisle was a smaller table with two chairs on either side, and there were kind of couch-like places to sit on either side of that. The passageway narrowed and from that part, midships to the after part of the ship, as you moved to the ship on the starboard side was a bedroom with a bath, a bedroom with two twin beds, a small dressing room which the President himself used. And the after part of that was the rear of the plane where there was room for about eight or nine or ten people, where Secret Service and other people used to sit.

When we got aboard I got as far as midships, the President's office, and there I saw Thornberry and Thomas, Brooks, I think Gonzalez, but I can't be sure. They were there and we were all talking in hushed tones. I still had not seen the new President, didn't know where he was. We were sitting there some time when suddenly he appeared in this passageway, looming over us. I recall several things: one, we all stood up automatically. Even in that instant there was a new demeanor in all of us, and certainly in Johnson. I often thought that he looked graver. Whatever emotions or passions he had in him, he had put them under strict discipline. He was very quiet and seemingly very much in command of himself. I remember Thomas saying very quietly, "Mr. President, anything you want us to do, we're ready to carry out your orders." That's the first time I had heard him called Mr. President.

Johnson murmured "Hello" to me, and he sat down. They had a big television set on the smaller table--not on the President's table--

and that was on. The President watched that for a moment, and then there was some talking between him and Marie Fehmer. Then Kenny O'Donnell and Larry O'Brien came in a couple of times and he said something to them.

I never saw any of the so-called friction that in the Manchester book was alleged to have existed. If it was there, I was not aware of it. Of course, you must understand that I didn't know the names and faces of the players. I'd just seen O'Donnell and O'Brien once. A man later identified as General McHugh kept darting back and forth and going from the rear of the plane to the forward part of the plane. I learned later he was the Air Force aide to the President. I must say he was in a state of near hysteria, his hair flying wildly. He was darting back and forth with his hair awry and in a general state of confusion.

I found out at that point that President Johnson had made a decision to take the oath of office there in the field and then fly to Washington. The first duty that I performed for the President--

F: As far as you know, did he discuss this with anyone or was this--?

V: That I can't tell. That I don't know. Everything now is hearsay.

F: But he didn't want to leave the country, even for that short period, [without a President?]

V: All I have is hearsay evidence. I was told that he had talked to the Attorney General, but I'm not aware of that. By the time I came aboard I think that probably the decision was already made. At any rate we determined that we were waiting for Judge Sarah Hughes to come aboard.

At that point somebody said, "What's the oath of office." A call had been placed to Washington to get it, and when the call came back

in I took the call just outside the President's office, which is mid-ship on the plane. A disembodied voice was reading this oath, which I was checking with the secretary, and I found out later it was Nick Katzenbach. I was told it was Nick Katzenbach, I did not know it at the time. But I reread the oath back to him and he checked the accuracy of it; we hung up, and then the oath was typed up neatly on a card.

About this time Judge Hughes came aboard the airplane. The oath was administered in the office part of the President's plane. Of course in the famous picture that was taken, we were all crowded around, Mac Kilduff, the assistant press secretary, was holding a tape recorder and Judge Hughes' back was to the narrow passageway leading to the rear of the plane. Mrs. Kennedy came in at that time and stood to the President's left and Mrs. Johnson to his right kind of cater-corner between the President's table and the other table across the aisle, with sort of their left shoulders to the starboard side of the airplane but not perpendicular.

In my anxiety to see this, what I knew as an historic moment, I clambered over one of the chairs, one of the chairs that faces the President's chair, and peered around the right of Albert Thomas right next to the window and watched the proceedings very clearly. I was very close to them. Judge Hughes administered the oath, the President kissed his wife and kissed Mrs. Kennedy on the cheek. Mrs. Kennedy's face was a mask of really passive grief, I suppose is the way you'd say it. She disappeared through the narrow passageway to the rear of the plane, and I never saw her any more during the rest of the trip.

Immediately after the oath was administered--

F: One moment. Was Judge Hughes able to contain her voice all right?

V: Her voice cracked and her hands were shaking. She was obviously rather in a state of--I would call it a state of near hysteria herself. But she managed to get through it and the President shook her hand. She immediately disembarked, and the President turned to someone and said, "Let's get this plane airborne." Almost within a minute the plane began to taxi onto the runway. We were airborne.

He sat at that time in the President's chair in the midships office, and the first call he made was he asked that a call be placed to Mrs. Joseph P. Kennedy. That call came through and he and Mrs. Johnson both talked to her. Mrs. Johnson was crying as she was talking to Mrs. Kennedy.

F: Could you tell anything about Mrs. Kennedy on the other end?

V: I could not tell anything because, as you well know, the President had the phone and then he passed it to Mrs. Johnson, and then he took it back again. Mrs. Johnson's eyes were brimming with tears as she talked.

F: More or less the traditional things that you say to someone who has just lost a son?

V: Yes. "My God, it was a horrible thing, how I wish that it had never happened."

The President, I know, talked to Bundy, he talked to Walter Jenkins--

F: They were back in Washington:

V: Back in Washington. Set up various meetings that needed to be set up.

F: Did he make any particular request on who should be at Andrews?

V: I don't remember. I do know that he turned to me and to Liz and to Bill Moyers, who was standing there, and said, "I want to get some ideas of what I should say when I land at Andrews." So Bill and Liz and I began to try to put together a statement.

F: To keep the picture, Liz in ordinary times is a very volatile person. What's she like in a period of stress like this?

V: She handled herself with great aplomb. She was very professional. As a matter of fact, totally calm and not at all wildly jumping around. She really was the one who sort of managed the President's statement. I had some lines I put in and so did Bill Moyers, but she was the one really taking it down, writing it. We put together a couple of paragraphs, and I remember we talked to the President and he said, no, he wanted to make a brief statement. He, with a pencil, began to scratch out a number of things we had written. We rewrote it and brought it back to him and he made some other changes, and finally wound up with what was delivered, which was a very brief statement that was delivered at Andrews.

F: What was Mrs. Johnson doing on the trip back?

V: Mrs. Johnson spent some time there, but most of the time she was back in the little bedroom. I really don't know where Mrs. Kennedy and the Kennedy people were. I suspect, and later I've been told that they were in that section--

F: In a sense, the staff didn't mix?

V: No, as a matter of fact, they didn't. They all stayed in the back. She never reappeared during the trip. They stayed in the rear. No, O'Brien and O'Donnell did come in on a couple of occasions, I remember that, to confer briefly with President Johnson. But I never noticed any hostility. These were, again, professional men operating in a moment of emergency, and they were doing what pros do, I suppose, to do what needed to be done.

We watched television news reports for a time but the television

reception was bad. The President went back into the bedroom with Marie Fehmer and Mrs. Johnson, I presume to dictate some things. We stayed there. I did not leave that cabin. The trip is a real blur in my mind.

F: It was, as far as the trip was concerned, routine?

V: Yes, I remember the following, though, with some clarity: When we landed at Andrews, everybody began to stand up. I remember, because I recognized him, coming through the forward part of the plane, really elbowing his way, was the Attorney General, Mr. Robert Kennedy, who came really racing through, neither looking to the right nor to the left to get to the back of the plane. The only thing that I noticed was that I remember that he passed President Johnson without saying anything, going to the rear of the plane, because as it suddenly developed there was a fork lift brought forward and the coffin was to be taken out of the rear exit, but no steps were there at that time, just the fork lift.

F: That's how he knew to go to the rear.

V: Yes, I suppose, I'm not sure. But I do know there was a big crowd then of people that blocked the passageway and, indeed, President Johnson was blocked off. We simply could not move until that coffin had gone, because at the most you can get two abreast, and not even two abreast very well in that passageway. So you get six or seven people in there between the entrance to the passageway and the entrance to the President's small bedroom and you literally are totally blocked. You cannot move. And that's what happened. I was maybe two people to the rear of the President and he was stymied. He could not move.

F: Did he show any great impatience?

V: No, he did not. He just stood there impassively without saying anything. Finally we did move off. After the coffin had been removed, stairs were brought up and we alighted from the rear of the plane. I remember there were two helicopters, and I got aboard the second helicopter. The President got aboard, I think, with Secretary Rusk and Mr. Bundy and Mr. McNamara, and I think George Ball, and Mrs. Johnson. I think that Liz and myself and Bill Moyers and the rest of the staff got on the second chopper--I didn't know I was a member of the staff at the time.

F: Had you recovered even your two days of clothes?

V: By this time I've got one day of clothes, because I had spent one night in Fort Worth and this was my Austin night clothes I had with me. I had a small bag, as a matter of fact. I didn't even have a spare suit.

I got in the helicopter and we helicoptered and landed on the south lawn. The interesting thing is I had never before ever visited the White House. This was the first time that I ever got inside the black gates, on this night.

F: That's one way to enter it!

V: Which is an unusual way to visit the White House for the first time.

It was of course very dark when we arrived.

F: Were people around the fence?

V: Yes, I could see people around the fence. There were some people waiting there in the darkness.

F: But the grounds were lighted?

V: The grounds are always lighted enough for a helicopter to land. This has always been vague to me because not knowing the surroundings of the terrain I didn't really know where we were. I have reconstructed it

now so that when we came in, we landed on the south grounds. I followed the President and everyone else, walking through the Diplomatic Reception Room, then through the porte-cochere that attaches from the west wing to the Mansion, through those doors, and then down the steps which lead you to the basement of the White House. And through the basement walking out the west basement, across Executive Avenue into the EOB and onto the second floor where the President had his vice presidential office. He did not even stop in the President's office.

F: Did you encounter much White House personnel on the way? Was there any sort of atmosphere, or were you unimpeded?

V: We were unimpeded, and of course fifteen or twenty people straggling along at that time. I was just keeping up with those in front of me. I wouldn't have even known if they were White House personnel or not because their faces were unknown to me.

But we got over to the vice presidential office, which was on the second floor of the EOB, and there we set up shop. I sort of sat down in an outer office because I simply didn't have any duties. I just sort of pitched in. I remember that night congressional leaders came; I remember Senator Dirksen came and the Speaker and others to be ushered in to see the President. I spent little time in his office. As I recall, he was sitting at his desk and from time to time we'd go in to take him a message.

By this time it must have been nine o'clock. About ten or eleven the President--I'm not clear on the time--came out of his office and called me to the side and said to me, "You can go home with me and you can stay at The Elms." I said, "Yes, sir."

F: Had you had any chance meanwhile to communicate with your wife?

V: Yes, I had called her and told her where I was.

F: So you weren't completely a lost person.

V: No, but it was some time before I communicated. There was a great blur of activity that night. And then around eleven the President, Cliff Carter and myself and Bill Moyers got into the President's car--Norman, his driver, was driving him--and we drove out to The Elms. When we got there there were a lot of people, several hundred I suppose, around the house. The Secret Service men had set up guards, but the phones hadn't been set up so that we really didn't have the right kind of communication; we just had the same telephones that they had had. They were working immediately trying to get phones put in.

When we got to The Elms there we went into the President's den, where he sat in his chair. I remember him sitting down there; Mrs. Johnson was there and myself, Cliff, Bill Moyers, Horace Busby, a number of other assorted people. He had a glass of orange juice, he lifted his glass to the picture of Speaker Rayburn that was on the opposite wall and he said: "I wish you were here."

We went into the dining room from time to time, there was food set up there, no one was really very hungry.

About midnight, one o'clock in the morning, people began to drift out and I followed President Johnson upstairs to his bedroom where Cliff Carter, myself and Bill Moyers sat around. I sat in a little chair next to the phone to the left of his bed, Bill sat on the edge of the bed and Cliff had a chair in between us. We had the television set on and the President put on his pajamas, propped himself up in the bed and we watched the news reports. From time to time he would say, "Now, tomorrow I want to talk to So-and-So." And I made these notes. One of

the great curses of my life is that I must have made ten pages of notes, which I then turned over to the secretaries the next day, and I never retrieved them. I don't know what happened to them, I've just been unable to find them. It dawned on me, to my stupidity, about ten days later that these were pretty historic and I tried to rummage around to find them but I was never able to locate them. So those priceless notes taken that night have long since disappeared.

At some time during the night, and I don't know when, I remember the President saying to me, leaning over, "Get hold of your wife and get some clothes sent up here. You can stay here; you can stay in the guest bedroom down the hall. I want you to stay up here and work on my staff," whatever that meant. I said, "Yes, sir." We stayed with him until about four o'clock in the morning, at which time we let him go to sleep and all of us spent the night. Cliff and Bill Moyers went up on the third floor to sleep and I went to the guest bedroom, which was where I stayed at The Elms until the time the President moved into the White House. Then he took me with him and I lived on the third floor of the White House until early February, when my wife came up and we found a house in Georgetown.

But the next morning Moyers, Carter and myself piled into the President's limousine and drove back to his office, where he worked out of the EOB. Now he did not move into the White House office for several days. And it must have been at least a week or ten days before he actually moved into the White House. He wanted to give Mrs. Kennedy plenty of time.

F: About two weeks.

V: Whatever it was, it was quite awhile before he moved into the White House.

In that time we settled into routine. I began to be a conduit of messages and generally working out of that office, but I don't really think I did anything of great importance because I was so new and green, inexperienced in the ways of Washington, that I really was of scant help, as I look back on it.

F: You had two things bothering you: one was that these were not routine days in a sense so that there was no normal routine for you to fit in, and the other is there was plenty to do.

V: That's right.

F: And so a man could just stand around and be useful.

V: There was plenty to do. I involved myself in a number of things. The President several times asked me to get in touch with people and gave me instructions to have them do something or be somewhere.

And then when we moved into the White House, I set up shop at a desk in his secretary's office near the door leading to the hallway of the west wing.

F: Before you get into that, was there any attempt at all to try to make the funeral plans enmesh with the new President's necessities, or did people go ahead independently and he fit to it?

V: My judgment and recollection was the funeral plans were being made by Mr. Shriver and others and not coordinating it with the President at all, except to let him know what the plans were.

F: You had this big diplomatic reception. That I presume was all handled by the State Department?

V: Yes, that's right. They handled that and also all of the foreign visitors that came in, where the President sat over there--I'm not even sure where it was, I think it was at the State Department.

F: There was no feeling either that regardless of the importance of the

visitor that under these circumstances the President had to meet the fellow in advance of--?

V: That's right. Particularly deGaulle and the rest of them coming over. They set up a routine whereby he would spend some private moments with each of the dignitaries or heads of government or chiefs of state who came to the funeral. I remember one decision that was made, whether or not President Johnson would walk in the funeral cortege. He made the decision that he would. There was some comment by the Secret Service; they were a little bit opposed to this. They were still very jumpy; having lost one President they were determined not to lose another. But President Johnson determined that he would march in that funeral cortege, and did.

That really sums up my recollection of the early days. I was not involved in any of the decision-making apparatus, I was really much on the periphery at that time.

F: Did you assist in the preparation of that talk to the joint Houses that he made?

V: Yes. I was involved in that. Some of the work was done at The Elms, going over it. Ted Sorensen did the original draft; Abe Fortas and myself sat with the President at The Elms and did some work on it.

F: Sort of tinkered.

V: Yes. He asked me to look it over and see if I had any suggestions and I made some, minor. Shortly after that, about two days later, he made a Thanksgiving Day address. That was written largely by Horace Busby. Again, I had a small hand in some tinkering with it. Then I oversaw the preparation of the actual paper, in putting it together. I remember that he made this speech right from the Oval Office, and at the last

minute we had some pages that had got out of place and we couldn't find them and it got a little bedlam around there. But as is usually the case, the speech before it was delivered was in good shape and he delivered that speech.

He began to do most of his work immediately after that on the budget and spent days and nights with Kermit Gordon. I remember many times that we were up late because I was really literally by the President's side from morning until night since I was living at the White House. I arose early, 6:30, had breakfast with him every morning, and then we'd go to the office, stay there all day and then go back at night. I literally for about two months did not ever leave an enclosure that went from the Oval Office to the Mansion. I guess I lived in a space of circumference of two hundred yards. Never left the White House, except whenever he would leave.

The main thrust of his work in those early days was on the budget.

F: Yes, and the State of the Union message.

V: And the State of the Union message, but mainly on the budget. I remember that we went to the Ranch for the Christmas holidays, and there I remember sitting in the guest house with Kermit Gordon and Walter Heller, Bill Moyers. The President told us to stay over there and work on a poverty program; he wanted to move into the poverty area. We were trying to decide what we would call it, we worked on that. Ted Sorensen came down, working on the State of the Union message. So December was really working on State of the Union, the budget, and putting together this program that he wanted to institute. There was a great deal of work going on at that time to make these preparation.

At that point the staff had not really shaken down. By this time.

I was closeted, sitting in an office with Ken O'Donnell, where he had always sat, and Bill Moyers had moved into a small office next to where Walter Jenkins was sitting, where Ralph Dungan had sat, and Walter Jenkins had moved into the big large room at the end of the hall. Ted Sorensen still occupied his big office at the other end of the hall. Actually, Dave Powers, Ken O'Donnell, Larry O'Brien, Mac Bundy, Ted Sorensen, Ted Reardon--the Kennedy people were still there, still on the President's staff. At that time there was myself and Moyers and Jenkins, Busby, who were involved as the President's staff; that's the only four people that he had.

F: Was there any problem at all in meshing efforts?

V: No, as a matter of fact, I was not aware of them. I think the only man that really gave me a rather bad time was Ted Sorensen; we have since laughed about it. I think Ted was still in a state of disrepair and resented me, I suppose he resented all the members of the President's staff.

I remember one of the first problems that we had in which Sorensen and I crossed swords was the Presidential Medal of Freedom, very quickly, because this affair was to have taken place several days after the 22nd of November. They had all been selected and there was some question as to whether or not President Johnson was going to really appear at this. Sorensen took umbrage and was very upset about it. I remember the President was still at The Elms and I was trying to convince him that it was in his best interest to personally be involved in this ceremony because they were honoring some of the famous American creative artists and other men of achievement and women of achievement in the country. I'm not sure who was finally persuasive, but I remember that he finally

told me that he would do it. So I became his emissary then, working with George Ball and Ted Sorensen in working out these plans. We finally determined that George Ball would announce the name and the President would read the citation of each of these outstanding people and make the award of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The affair took place in the State Dining Room, the first one. Sorensen became very upset and we had some crisp words, sitting in the Cabinet Room. The President was not there, but this Presidential Medal Committee, and I was the only presidential staff member sitting in on that. That was my first encounter, on an abrasive way, with Sorensen. As I say, later on we [laughed about it].

F: What was the point of dispute, just over detail?

V: The dispute was over what Sorensen thought was President Johnson turning his back on one of President Kennedy's great efforts. He thought this was ill-considered, he didn't like it, and I remonstrated with him, took the President's side, saying that he had never said he wouldn't do it, that he was thinking about it. Sorensen then made some tart comments and I responded in kind and it got a little shaky and a little cloudy for a moment, but then once the President had agreed that he would go there, that worked out all right.

The other time I ran in with Sorensen was when he was very upset about anybody tinkering or looking over his prose on the State of the Union message. He was very zealously guarding his copy of the document and the President gave it to me on several occasions to look at. I remember one comical thing was that when we drove down to the Capitol for the delivery of that State of the Union--Sorensen, O'Brien, myself and the President drove down--Sorensen was clutching the only copy of the docu-

ment in the car. And when I asked if I could hold it, he said, "No," that he was afraid if I did I'd be changing some of the words at the last minute. Later on we also became amused at that, but at that time it was not an amusing thing with him. He meant it. He was resentful of the President's men, the President's personal staff involving themselves in written prose that he had. But that was the only source of friction that I encountered.

F: Was Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. doing anything?

V: No, not at that time. The President had sent over a couple of things for him to work on, a couple of pieces of prose. Arthur at that time officed in the east wing, which physically is distant from the west wing and it's difficult to maintain communications. But I don't know whether Arthur felt left out or not; I don't think the President left him out deliberately, it was just that he was physically not there. Also, Sorensen would have resented it, I think. He wanted to be the chief architect of the presidential prose, as he was under Kennedy.

F: Had President Kennedy pretty well designated a man to do something like this? I know President Johnson's procedure is to put a team to work; he'll talk to anybody about any problem.

V: In the Kennedy [staff] Sorensen was in total command of presidential language, and, as I said, was very zealous about shepherding that right.

F: So he had to get used to a new procedure, didn't he?

V: Yes, but he left shortly thereafter. I think Ted left about February, if I recall, of 1964.

F: Were they ever all called in as a group and given the old kind of pep talk, "I want you to stay on" and so on?

V: No, the President did that singly. He talked to each one of them singly,

to Schlesinger, to O'Donnell, to O'Brien, and to Sorensen, each one of them he asked to stay on, saying that he needed them and wanted them to be aboard.

F: Did he ever talk to you about the Kennedy staff that he inherited?

V: No, he never did. I was always polite, courteous; as a matter of fact, I wanted to be. These people were famous people to me, I had read about them and heard about them and now I was working with them, and I gave them what I believe was sincere respect. I got along splendidly with Ken O'Donnell, I shared this office. He told me, "Look, you're the appointments secretary and you should handle it." I always asked him questions when I had a problem and he was always gracious to give me an answer, gave me advice, because the President was increasingly using him in the political field. I was handling appointments and Ken O'Donnell was working with the committee and sort of preparing for the 1964 campaign, so that all during 1964 we shared that office. He spent about half or three-quarters of the day over at the national committee, working there, and I manned the appointments office.

F: How did you begin to work out what you wanted to emphasize in the State of the Union and in your plans for your legislative program?

V: The President pretty much engendered all of that in that first one. Mainly, as you recall, there was a great horde of legislation which had been hung up in the Congress, and the first order of business was to unplug these stagnant pieces of legislation and let them flow out of the Congress as law. The tax bill was locked up in the Finance Committee, the civil rights bill was languishing and unable to get it moving, so there was a great plethora of legislation already ready to move forward. President Johnson's first order of the day was to get it un-

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stuck.

The first thing that he did though was to get that budget. I recall that one instant early, before he really got moving, he knew that he had to announce the budget some time in February or March and he also knew that he had to get that tax cut out. It was his general feeling, after discussing with Walter Heller and Kermit Gordon--Gordon was the Director of the Budget, Heller was Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers--that all that President Johnson wanted to do would be hinged to the tax cut. Unless he got the tax cut they weren't sure they could keep the economy moving upward in this ascending spiral. So the first order of business was to get the tax bill, spring it from the Finance Committee, then presided over by the late Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia.

I remember that the President as the first order of business called Harry Byrd to the White House to lunch with him. To my knowledge, this is the only time the President ever lunched in the small office off the Oval Office. I remember that he personally sort of supervised the setting and the menu. Harry Byrd came to lunch and the two of them sat in that office. The President called me in as an observer. The prime motive of that lunch was to get Byrd's agreement to release the tax cut from the committee, bring it to a vote so that it could go to the floor of the Senate. I remember he and Senator Byrd talking. He said to Harry: "This tax cut is vital to my program. I've got to have it." And Harry Byrd said, "Well, Mr. President, I don't see how we can get a tax cut as long as this budget is so big."

At that time the noise in the corridors was that the budget would

be \$107 to \$109 billion. The President said to Harry Byrd, "Well now, Harry, suppose I could get this budget under \$100 billion dollars? I don't know that I can, but if I do, what do you think?" First the President said, "I don't know how I can get this budget lower than about \$102 or \$104 billion," and Harry Byrd said "That's much too big, Mr. President, that's just too big." And then that's when he said, what happens if he could get it beneath \$100 billion, and Harry Byrd said, "We might be able to do some business." Then the President said, "Well, if I get this budget under \$100 billion, Harry, do you think we can get this tax cut out of your committee and onto the floor?" In a sense Harry Byrd said yes, he thought that if the budget came in under \$100 billion, yes, he thought it was possible that the committee might act on it.

Immediately the President concluded that lunch. He had gotten a commitment out of Harry Byrd and he knew his man pretty well and knew that once Byrd gave his word he would not renege on it.

So having now gotten Harry Byrd to make a commitment that if the budget came in under \$100 billion, the tax cut would be sprung from the committee and brought to the floor, then the President redoubled his efforts with Kermit Gordon. They really rode over every item of that budget and they were hacking away with machetes.

F: Did he and Kermit Gordon make a good team?

V: Oh, yes, very good.

F: And Heller?

V: And Heller. They all worked together splendidly.

F: They'd talk with each other?

V: Oh, yes, absolutely. And Gordon was spending practically every night down at the White House in the President's office, going over this budget.

Then they would call in department heads, one at a time, and work on them so that the President got the budget down to, I think it was \$99.4, or \$97.4, I can't be sure now, I think it was \$99.4 is what they got it to. I remember that he had a press meeting in his office, called the press in and announced the budget. It was totally surprising to the press, caught them off guard, no one really thought the budget was going to be that low. And the President kept that a well-guarded secret; literally only he and Kermit Gordon knew, and I knew by looking at some of the documents. I was seeing every document that passed his desk so I was privy to that information, but didn't dare even tell my wife about it. So it came as a total surprise to the press.

As a matter of fact, that might have begun the so-called credibility gap. The press thought that they were being misled.

F: This cutting of the budget, did this involve scrapping any vital Kennedy programs?

V: No, I don't think so. I just think that it meant really--

F: Squeezing the water out.

V: Squeezing everything out, particularly on defense, not putting a lot of new things in defense and going back and cutting everything that could possibly be cut. If something was \$100 million, they'd cut it to \$80; if something was \$25, they'd cut it to \$22. By going over every nook and cranny of the budget they were able then to bring it into line. And I think the press felt then that they'd been misled, but what the press didn't know was that when Johnson told Byrd that he was trying to get this budget under \$100 billion he didn't know that he could do it. At that time they had not been able to get it under \$100 billion. Second, the earlier comments of \$107 to \$108 represented the best judgment of

Kermit Gordon at that time. So the press really wasn't being misled at all. They felt like this was a ploy that the President was using. My own judgment was it was not, that they wanted news and he was giving it to them and the word got out that it was about \$108 or \$109 billion.

But he really went back after that conference with Byrd to do a superhuman effort to hack away at that budget to bring it in line. But that was the first major breakthrough and when the tax cut came to the floor, of course, it was passed. That's what the President was doing on all of these programs. The war on poverty was really the first new Johnson program to be instituted in 1964.

So at that moment, it was really as he said, "Let us continue." It was a continuation.

F: Was his prime concern in getting things out of committee or wherever they were stalled and onto the floor of the Congress and into law? Was he having any time at all to spend in initiating any changes or additions?

V: I think in the beginning part, you must remember from November 22 to say mid-January when the State of the Union was coming, it was mostly a continuation because there was not much time to really do a lot of great innovation at that moment. Later on in the year the President decided to inaugurate task forces, in which about ten or twelve great issues of the time like fiscal poverty and labor and defense and welfare, civil rights and housing, task forces organized. Bill Moyers sort of took over the direction of those task forces. They were the ones from which emerged a great many ideas that Johnson used in the preparation of the State of the Union of 1965.

F: Am I right in believing that under Kennedy you had had a number of

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study groups of one sort or another who were still in a sense studying at the time that the President came in and he more or less wrapped them up and started some action with statistics?

V: Yes, that's true, but I think he enlarged them, they got new people going on them and they really activated them. Also they began to put a veil of secrecy over their proceedings so that the President's choices could be made instead of having somebody leaking something and forcing it on him. He wanted a chance to really look over, peruse the whole task force operation so he could pick and choose that which he thought was best.

F: Did he have in a sense a priority, or was he bringing a whole lot of things along together? In other words, was civil rights more important than a tax cut--did one thing come before another? I presume the tax cut was paramount before he could begin to think what he was going to do with other programs.

V: I think the tax cut was foremost because he knew unless he could keep the economy going it would be very difficult to do any of the things he wanted to do.

F: He was banking on an expanded gross national product.

V: That's right. Then I'd say that number two in his priority was civil rights. I'll never forget one time in the middle of the civil rights battle that Roy Wilkins told me, "You know, it's very strange, isn't it, that the bravest and strongest and most compassionate man that the Negro has ever had in this country is Lyndon Johnson? God does move in wondrous ways." This was after the Civil Right Act of '64 was passed and we were into the Voting Rights Act of '65. So the President had determined that he was going to move on civil rights.

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It was his judgment, I know that he spoke to me before he became President, that the key to all the Negroes' future free movement and power in the United States had to do with the vote; that unless the Negro had the vote he would never really find the full legacy of his legal rights ever bestowed upon him; that once he had the right to vote all over the country, the south and the north, that political power would flow from that and that from political power would flow all the other benefits that rightfully belonged to the black man in America. This was a key concept of Johnson: that is, to free the Negro of these entanglements and barriers and hedgerows of voting and giving him full voting rights and protection for voting. That out of that would come, as it so accurately proved, all the other deeds that would give sustenance to his hopes. And so he concentrated on that. Those were two very special--

F: Do you think his being a semi-southerner with a commitment to civil rights gave him a leverage that presidents such as Kennedy and Eisenhower, who came from considerably more liberal areas, did not have?

V: That's hard to say. My own judgment is that--

F: In other words, could he talk to the boys from Georgia and Alabama?

V: Yes, but he was never going to get them to vote for civil rights, he knew that. But what he had to do was to open up the debate and make it clear to the moderates and the Northerners and the Westerners and the Southwesterners that it was in their best interest to vote this.

No, I think that Johnson's great asset came in his intimate, sensitive, instinctual knowledge of how the Congress operated. He was able to bring to bear all the skills that he had on these various pieces of legislation. For all of the things they were able to do, I think that

President Kennedy and his aides weren't using the right methods with the Congress and as a result, practically all of their legislation was totally clogged at the time.

F: I wonder in a sense if theirs weren't a little more of a state of vacuum, a little more cerebral and not enough man-to-man?

V: No, I don't think that at all. I just think it's the way you approach the Congress. He knew that in order to get a congressman to vote for something you've got to put it on such a basis that the congressman can vote for it and explain his vote back home. Now there's no problem in the northern state, but in the border states and in some of the western states and the Southwest, he had to put all of these great bills that he wanted to pass and fashion them in such a way and give rational reasons for voting that a congressman could go back and say, "Well, I voted for this, but let me tell you why I did." And by emphasizing the fact that the voting rights was the most important right that anybody could have, he was able to convince a lot of congressmen that they ought to vote for it.

And then of course I think that a new President, vigorous, with this great knowledge of the Congress, did have a better instinct about how to move things, how to persuade somebody--not arm twisting, but persuasion; there's a vast difference.

F: Did you have any work with congressional relations yourself?

V: The President had sort of put me in charge of a number of the key leaders where he let them know when they had a problem they could call me direct and they would have instant access to the President. Senator Mansfield, Senator Dirksen, the Speaker and certain key people like Albert Thomas, who was very powerful that I knew and was his

lieutenant for so many years, he was able to do that; Congressman Frank Bow of Ohio, who was a key Republican on the Appropriations Committee; and people of that kind. So I got to know them very well and then we gave them "instant service."

When you're working in the White House, you never can forget who you are. A lot of times you think that it's your own charm and personality that gives you some kind of a leverage with people, but you must always remember that you speak with the voice of the President and that's where your power comes from. I never forgot that the men of the Congress were very important people; that they had all won office which nobody in the White House had ever done. So I was challenged constantly by responding to their requests quickly and with respect so that when they called if they needed something or wanted an answer to something, within hours I'd be back with them with the answer. If they wanted something to get on the President's desk, I saw that it got there and got some instant response. This kind of treatment is what a congressman responds to, not so much arm twisting, but it pleases a congressman to know that the people care about him.

F: There's nothing worse than that call that's not returned.

V: That's right. And that's all a part of a kind of way you feel about the White House. When you know that what you say is heard and people respond to it, that you're treated with courtesy and respect, after awhile that has a very nice warm result.

F: How much leeway did you have with the President's calendar? Did you clear everything with him? If someone like Albert Thomas, who obviously has entree, called and said, "I need to see the President," and then you would look at his calendar and say, "He's free at six this evening,"

could you go ahead and do that?

V: I would have certain people that I'd put on the calendar without any problem, I wouldn't even check it with the President, I'd show it to him. For the most part what I would do would be make up a calendar, say, for the next two days and I'd take it to him and say, "Here's what I've done." He'd look at it and say, "That's fine," or he'd say, "Well, now look, I can't see him. I'm just not ready to talk to him yet." Or "Why do I have to do this? This is going to cut into my time over here."

F: Did he decide who was on the record and who was off?

V: Yes. After awhile as you get more experience you know instantly what you have on the record and what you don't.

F: What I was getting at, you're starting out as just another intelligent citizen in a sense, you know names, but--

V: In the very first part, Kenny O'Donnell was very helpful. After about six months on the job, I had enough experience then to know, but many times the President would say, "Let's put him on the record. I want him on the record," or, "him off the record." I'd check it out with him. But for the most part I could pretty well judge. Many times you don't ever want to put a congressman on the record because if Congressman X sees the President, Congressmen A, B, C, D and Y want to know why they can't see the President.

F: Yes, and the press wants to know what they talked about.

V: That's right. So you put somebody on the record when you want to make note of what they say. If it's a problem that's uniquely congressional many times you keep it off the record; you bring him in the side door, he'd see the President and be on his way. Now obviously he's going to

let it be known somewhere down the line that "I saw the President," and, "As I was telling the President," etc. But you recognize that. That's just judgment, instinct, experience. And after awhile I would check less and less with the President, but I'd always go over the program with him because that he might have some reason that I didn't know about where something ought not be put on the schedule or where somebody ought to be off the record instead of on.

F: Was the President working primarily with Mike Mansfield and with Senator Dirksen as his two--?

V: Yes. And Senator Humphrey, of course, was very much involved. He was the floor leader of civil rights and I was also involved with him. You have to remember how it existed in '64.

F: How did the President get Dirksen to support the civil rights measure in '64?

V: Many times they met by themselves and I don't know that anybody can actually say why.

F: The Senator and I were just getting into that when he died.

V: I think that he really convinced Dirksen that this could be sort of like a Vandenberg changing from foreign relations; that this would be a great thing for Dirksen, a statesmanlike attitude; and that also the winds of time were changing. I think after awhile he convinced Dirksen that it was in Dirksen's long-range best interest to go along with this. I think that's the way it happened. I don't think there was any quid pro quo involved at all.

F: You were starting to say something else about your--

V: I was saying that I was involved in this appointments secretary job throughout '64 and through the campaign, so that I was really on this

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job for about a year. In about January or February of '65, Marvin Watson came on the staff full-time; I relinquished those duties and then I took on other duties of coordinating all the President's speeches. Although I still maintained long-range scheduling for him, speeches and that sort of thing, Marvin handled the day-to-day scheduling. I was also still involved with my liaison with these top congressional people so that they--you know, every congressman or senator likes to have someone that he can trust, that he can call at the White House. I was also involved at the President's request in National Security matters.

F: The charge was made, and we won't get into whether right or wrong but I want the philosophy of it, that you were much more approachable and much more understanding of people who needed some contact with the President than Marvin, who was almost totally protective in his attitude, and that Marvin brushed off people. Can an appointments secretary do that sort of thing over a period of time successfully? Can he keep people who ought to have the President's ear from getting the President?

V: Yes, he can. I don't know how Marvin handled that job or how Ken O'Donnell handled it, so I can't speak to that. I can only tell you how I approached the job. I approached the job in two ways: one is that I recognized that a congressman and a senator is an important man in his state and his district.

F: He represents a million people nowadays.

V: That's right. I always remembered, too, that I always wanted to put myself in somebody else's shoes. Third, I remembered that any injustice they might suffer at my hands, I wouldn't be the legatee of their distaste, but I would be hurting the President. So I put special emphasis on the human side of relationships with the Congress so that when they called and they hung up they would know: one, that someone was genuinely

interested in whatever it was they had to say; number two, that someone was going to perform a service for them; and, number three that they were important in the White House.

Now when you put all those three together it's very difficult for a congressman or a senator to become angry at you over imagined slights. He may get angry at you because you're unable, because his cause may be unwinnable, his request is ungrantable.

F: This is a little bit like prayer and God didn't answer my prayer the way I asked Him.

V: That's right. But the thing that I think that anyone who's representing the President in conversations was to remember that these are human beings with egos and pride and sensitivities. So I really went out of my way. Now this is very difficult. It's much easier to give somebody short shrift because it doesn't take up your time. Many a time I'd have to be on the phone for fifteen minutes with a man when I could have brushed him off in one, but when you put in that extra time I think it pays off in the long run as far as the President is concerned, not because of you personally. So I really can't tell how anybody else handled their relationships.

F: Were you in a pretty good position to farm out requests that would involve a lot of your time to find out things that you needed to know?

V: Absolutely. For example, somebody would call about a postmastership they thought was being held up--or somebody in one of the departments was giving them a bad time. I would merely call up the department and say, "Now look, I don't know what the facts are, but before the day's out I want a report on where this thing stands." When I'd get the report I'd say, "All right now, you get the assistant secretary to call

that congressman and tell him exactly why this has been held up and what the problem is and hold yourself open for any request that he has so that you're able to respond to him." I don't think I ever told anybody "You do that" when they thought it was not the thing to do. But many times it's a case of communication, of making somebody knowledgeable and not making them think that you're treating them with disdain. Many times all a man wants to do is "can you see that the President knows about this." And I could call him back the next day and I could say, "Senator, I want you to know that I gave your note to the President. He's delighted that you called and he has asked me to do the following." Maybe I just gave the note to the President and no such thing happened, but I always said "the President directed me to do so-and-so," not that "I'm doing it," but that "the President wanted this done and he wanted you to know the following." That's very pleasing to a congressman; that makes him feel like "Well, by God, they do care about me and they don't treat me like I'm just a nobody."

Obviously the leadership and the committee chairmen don't have that problem because they have power, but there are a lot of congressmen who are just middle tenure senators and congressmen. And I think this pays off. I think it pays off a good deal.

F: When did you begin to plan for the campaign and the convention?

V: We started planning in early spring, as I recall. It began to break down that Walter Jenkins was sort of the one that was involved in the convention itself with Cliff Carter; and that I would be handling the scheduling of the President, working with Ken O'Donnell and Larry O'Brien; and that Bill Moyers and I would be in charge of the advertising agency and the media and that sort of thing. Then we set up with

Bill Wirtz a speech writing apparatus where the speeches would come either to Moyers or myself, working out of Bill Wirtz's. He had a staff of maybe fifteen people that were working on these things.

We set up an advance man operation which operated through me, in which we had a great advance situation set up.

Meanwhile Walter Jenkins was handling the convention. We brought Marvin Watson in to specifically handle housing and placement of people because you could make a lot of enemies there. Marvin's a good organizer and he handled that phase of the convention. Then we had good chairmen, Hale Boggs and Governor Lawrence and those kind of people, who were involved in handling the various committees at the convention.

So planning began very quickly, with Walter Jenkins really being pretty much the chief lieutenant in the convention planning.

F: Did the President ever talk to you about his vice presidential possibilities?

V: No, he never really did, but I don't believe that any of the staff ever really thought he was going to choose anybody but Humphrey. Humphrey was the choice of the staff as far as I could tell, certainly my choice.

F: You really didn't think that McCarthy was much more than just an idea?

V: No, not at all.

F: And that Dodd was just a--

V: The way that happened was, I was involved.

F: It was a means of helping Dodd?

V: I was involved in that and I remember the President wanted to cover to the last minute his final selection. The President believed in drama and I think that's very good--the dramatics of a situation are very important. I remember he was talking to Walter Jenkins and suggested

that they bring Humphrey down but he said "Let's cover it to the last minute. Dodd's up for re-election. Let Dodd come down with him." He had no idea of taking Dodd, but he thought this would be a slight cover. And besides it could help Dodd, who was up for re-election. So he thought that was a happy compromise.

I know that he sent me to the airport. I went out to Washington National, they came in a private plane and I had an unmarked car and picked them up, the two of them, and sat in the back seat with them. We went driving around Washington to wait for the right time to come in, because the President wanted us to come in at a specific time. I told Senator Humphrey and Senator Dodd, "Now the President is going to see each of you separately, chat with you both. I would make no statements, but if you have to make a statement the President wanted to chat with you about the convention and so you came down to visit him at his request."

It so happens that we got to the White House a little bit early and parked the car in front of the south grounds entrance. Then the President came down and we all walked over to the Mansion, at that point the President, Humphrey and Dodd. He was parrying all the questions, because then the very fact that Dodd was there did create some doubt in the mind of the press so they really weren't 100 percent sure. But the President, in my judgment, was increasing the drama of the situation, giving Dodd a little lift in his re-election bid.

F: He'd get a little exposure in the New York papers if they're read in Connecticut.

V: That's right. But there was no question in his mind that he wasn't making any decision; it had been made long before. I'm convinced

there was never any doubt in his mind that he wanted to have Humphrey. I think it was a pretty popular decision. Humphrey was the man to be on the vice presidential ticket.

F: Do you think the President from the first wanted to win big or just win? Of course everybody likes to win as well as he can, but how much did he want to win for himself and how much did he want to win to bring in a big Democratic majority?

V: I think at the very beginning of a campaign you're not quite sure. I think he wanted to win, win substantially, but I think as we moved into the campaign, some time in late September when we made a six-stop trip. We went to Hartford, Connecticut; to Providence, Rhode Island; to Burlington, Vermont; to Portland, Maine; to Boston, Massachusetts; Manchester, New Hampshire--six New England states. That day was probably the most satisfying day of the campaign. We encountered crowds and affection and applause and adulation such as we never duplicated in the campaign, early in the campaign. That one day told us, and surely the President, that something big was brewing; that there was an opportunity here to win this election so smashingly that we could elect by far all these congressmen that we were worried about.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

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