

INTERVIEW III

DATE: February 19, 1971

INTERVIEWEE: JACK VALENTI

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: Jack Valenti's office in Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

F: This is interview number three with Jack Valenti in his office in Washington, D.C., February 19, 1971. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

Jack, we were discussing the last time the campaign of '64 and we shut off on the campaign swing through New England. Now then, as you know, along about that time when the President was up in New York we had the unfortunate episode of Walter Jenkins and I wanted to talk a little bit about that.

V: As I recall, that came to the President, I think it was October 4 or 5. I know that on that day he was scheduled to visit Mrs. Kennedy in her New York apartment.

F: We're talking about Jacqueline now?

V: Yes, Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy. That evening he was to address, if my memory is correct, the Al Smith dinner in the Waldorf. He was staying on the 35th floor, apartment 35-A I believe; I was with him at the Waldorf.

As I recall, though I could be mistaken, he got a call from George Reedy, telling him of Walter's arrest. I was standing by the phone when the President was talking. I had no idea what he was getting on the other end, but I do recall that he was very calm and I did not see him betray any noticeable emotion. His voice was questioning and sharp, but

there was no indication that a catastrophe had taken place. I remember him putting down the phone and explaining to me what had happened and I was totally shocked.

F: It wasn't a sort of "Oh, my God, we're ruined" reaction?

V: Oh, no, nothing about that at all. Then he placed several other phone calls. I know one was to Abe Fortas to get his judgment about this. And then he talked to Mrs. Johnson. Then at some point, I don't know to whom, it seemed to me that after a series of phone calls the decision was made that it was best for all concerned if Walter were to resign immediately. I know the President was in a difficult situation because obviously this was going to be the big news story. I think the decision was made, and I'd suspect that somebody, probably Abe, had talked to Walter and it was determined that Walter would proffer his resignation immediately and the President would accept it.

Shortly after that he left the Waldorf unaccompanied by me. I stayed there to go over some last minutes for his speech that evening. He went to see Mrs. Kennedy. I've often speculated on what happened there. My judgment would be that Mrs. Kennedy had no inkling of any kind of what went on in the President's mind. I have reconstructed it and this must have been an absolute blow with an axe handle to his stomach, but at no time did he give any indication, either by voice or movement or facial expression, that this terrible blow had struck him.

F: Really iron discipline.

V: That's right, I was quite impressed by it. Later on that evening he went down to the podium at the Waldorf and delivered a fine speech, engaging in conversation with people at the head table, and I daresay that there was no indication on their part that anything was wrong.

As political luck would have it, at least that's the way I construe it, the very next day Khrushchev was deposed. That seized all the front page and the headlines and all of the columnists and all of the commentators.

F: And drove Walter back into perspective.

V: It drove Walter, if not off the front page, at least to a minor position on the front page, and sometimes on page two and three. As you might suspect, the Khrushchev thing kept stirring and boiling for several days, which was an act of political fortuity. It just happened and one can't know why.

The problem with Walter could have been a serious political blow. I think the way the President handled it, I think Mrs. Johnson's marvelous compassionate statement made on behalf of the family--

F: Was that her initiative?

V: Yes. As I understand it, this was Mrs. Johnson's initiative and indeed her drafting of the statement.

F: I thought it was an inspired move, quite apart from the humanity of it, from a political standpoint; it quieted things I think.

V: I really believe that Mrs. Johnson, and again I'm only speculating, had no desires about making political gains. Walter Jenkins was like her blood relative and she wanted to tell Walter that "We understand and we're with you even though by necessity, by hard political necessity we have to do the things that we have to do, such as accept your resignation." That was, as I recall the Walter Jenkins' affair, sad and to this hour I'm still shocked by it; Walter is my good friend.

F: Did you get any feeling that he had been kind of set up for this?

V: There was a lot of talk, particularly among the President's entourage,

that there was some entrapment here. I don't know. I cannot tell you what happened there. It seemed passing strange that two detectives were there in the YMCA at this particular time. It had all the earmarks to me of some kind of entrapment, but perhaps my objectivity is dulled because of my vast affection for Walter. But it did seem rather strange. We do know that Walter had been that evening in the hour before at a Newsweek party. He doesn't drink and I understand he had a couple of martinis, and obviously this might have had some effect on him. I don't know. All I know is, in all of my years of friendship with Walter Jenkins, that for which he was arrested made no visible outcropping of any kind; he was a dear, good man, hardest worker in the President's shop, totally dedicated and devoted to the President in his cause and his work; and every man on that staff without one exception respected him, admired him and loved him, because he was fair and honest, tough when he had to be, but always a man of great compassion. I do not see this side of Walter that was brought out in the papers. I don't see it now, I don't intend to see it.

F: Two things and we'll leave this. One is, Walter had to be cleaned out of office physically. Did he come back and do it himself, or did the staff pack for him?

V: If he did, I didn't see him. My judgment is that his long-time aides in the office cleaned out his desk for him.

F: Question two. This is right in the stretch run of a campaign and all of a sudden you have a staff disorientation, you're going to have to rearrange. Did this cause much of a problem?

V: No. I daresay the problem was caused within the President himself because Walter took on so many chores of the President that other staff

members weren't even aware of.

F: I'm sure the President was used to just saying "Walter" instinctively.

V: You see, Walter alone among the staff members, could talk to senators and congressmen on the most important subjects without having them feel that they should talk to the President, because they knew when they talked to Walter, above all men, that they were speaking to the President. Now I do know that each of us on the staff took on a lot more chores, but it wasn't any inconvenience. We took up a lot of the phone calls, a lot of the conduit of message passing, and also some conferences, projects and other things that we hadn't been involved in before. But there was no discommoding of the campaign. Walter was not really involved that heavily in the actual campaign, he was making the office run, as it were, and a number of us were involved in the actual campaign work, strategy, planning, tactics, etc. So I believe that the work went forward with nary a bobble, not because Walter wasn't missed but because in the pressures of a campaign you can let things go within the office that under ordinary circumstances you would not. The President's on the road a good deal and people don't expect to have that kind of contact with him.

F: Going back to earlier in '64, did the President ever express himself as to whom he would like the Republicans to nominate? Was Goldwater his choice?

V: I don't really ever remember the President specifically stating it, though I suspect all of us really thought that Goldwater would be the man we would most like to contend with. I personally have a great affection for Senator Goldwater. I think he's a man. He's strong and he's tough and he stands up and fights. But this had to do with his

political structure of the country at the time, and on the issues that he would raise. It was our judgment that it would be a clear-cut issue between a conservative and a moderate liberal; his views that he held on a number of social issues we thought were ready-made for campaigning and that we could define the issues more clearly with, as one of his own supporters would say, "It's time to make a choice." There was a difference between their political ideologies, a difference that could be exploited and made clear to the public. So, on that basis I think there was general agreement within the White House staff that Goldwater was the man we would most like to go to the well with.

But the President, I never really heard him say "I want Goldwater." He was not very forthcoming on making predictions or revealing his thoughts ever on any subject, so I never heard him say that.

F: You had two problems with the Democratic convention in '64. One was to sustain any excitement in a foregone conclusion; the other one, of course, is the very ticklish one of who's going to be the running mate. So that takes us back earlier to that pronouncement that no Cabinet member will be eligible to be Vice President. Could you throw any light on that?

V: Again, I will give you what I think. I've often been of the judgment that White House staff members don't really know why a President came to a certain decision because they're not privy to all that was fed into his mind and heart before the decision was made.

F: You may have seen John Roche's column on that not too long ago; that the further from the President a man in the White House is, the more he knows what the President was thinking.

V: That's right. I know that when Townsend Hoopes' book came out, The

Limits of Intervention, I wrote an article for The Washington Post in which I made that same issue: that no one can tell you how a President came to a decision because no one knows all of the information and all of the ingredients to which he was exposed before he made the decision.

As far as the Cabinet thing was concerned about the vice presidency, my own judgment is that the President was determined that he did not want Bobby on that ticket.

F: Do you think he was getting really active pressure to take on Bobby?

V: I don't believe that there was any specific or particular pressure. Obviously there was a lot of talk in the press. I think this was really fed by the medium more than people calling the President up and saying, "Why don't you put Bobby Kennedy on your ticket." My own judgment is that long before, however, he made the Cabinet walk the plank on the vice presidential issue. I think long before that he really had made up his mind that Hubert Humphrey was the man he would feel most comfortable with, and the man that he probably thought was best equipped to be President should something happen to him.

F: Do you think Gene McCarthy was ever in the race, or was he just something to create excitement?

V: No, I don't believe so. There was some talk in the White House about having a Catholic on the ticket, but I don't believe at any time Senator McCarthy was seriously considered.

F: But you don't think there was any chance that Bobby was ever going to make it?

V: No, I don't believe so. I don't believe the President was going to put Bobby on the ticket. For some unfathomable reason, or perhaps not so unfathomable, I think that between Robert Kennedy and the President

there was always this feeling of hostility. Whence it stemmed, I don't know. Maybe it came from the fact that the President was treated rather cavalierly by the Kennedy staff, and maybe inadvertently by Bobby Kennedy when he, Johnson, was Vice President. I cannot speculate on that, I wasn't in Washington. And the President never spoke about it in my presence. This all comes from third party sources. It may have been that the President decided that in order to make it his presidency and to escape the always looming shadow of the Kennedys, that he must have someone on his ticket who was not a Kennedy; otherwise that shadow would after awhile engulf him and probably strangle him. As it was, the image of the young, dashing, gallant President was always there and may have had more impact on the President's mind and spirit than any of us really realized.

F: The flirtation with Senator Dodd was just that?

V: That's right. I was involved with that. I think the President wanted to play a little game with the press at that time, and he always likes surprises, never liked to tip his hand, and I think this was part of the theatrics. I will say that the White House staff, I think to a man we were all pro-Humphrey. I have met many men in political life, but I don't know one who has the spark of innovative wit and facility with mind and tongue as Hubert Humphrey. And also he's a great innovator. He's a man of great daring, an idea man, the sort of man who was constantly searching for new ways to do old things better. I think the President had great respect and admiration for Humphrey in that regard. So the White House staff was very much pro-Humphrey.

When the President called Walter Jenkins at the convention and said that he wanted to have Humphrey come down, I think as an afterthought

he thought "Send Tom Dodd with him." Now he knew that Dodd was up for election in Connecticut, the exposure wouldn't hurt him, it might help him a little bit, and this was a kind of comic turn for me because the President sent me out to National Airport. I went to Page Airways out there to pick up Senators Humphrey and Dodd.

F: Did they come in together?

V: They came in together aboard a light plane. I had a car and was waiting for them. I got them in the car and I said, "Now gentlemen, we're going to go slow. We're supposed to arrive at the White House at a particular time. The President wants to see both of you and chat with you."

F: The President didn't want them early, waiting around?

V: That's right. The press was going to be there and I think Johnson was sort of stage-managing this to give it all the effect that he could, to sort of keep the press guessing a little while longer. I remember that we got to the White House gates a little early and so I decided that we would go driving around the Elipse for a while in order to use up some time and to arrive at the White House at the appointed hour. I can assure you that if we had had a recording device inside that car, it would have been comical to hear what Humphrey and Dodd and I were talking about because I'm sure it was quite inane.

It was rather funny because Dodd wasn't quite sure what it was all about, Senator Humphrey was quite sure what it was all about, but there must have been some lingering doubt in his mind that the thing wasn't set yet, so I was trying to be gay and charming and unrevealing. I don't know whether I was successful in the first two, but I sure as hell was successful in the third.

At any rate, we went into the south grounds, southwest gate to the

Diplomatic Reception Room, and there we went inside the Diplomatic Reception Room and then across the corridor to the west wing, where the President then had Senator Dodd come in first, and he chatted with him and that's when he told him that he thought he'd make Senator Humphrey Vice President. Dodd thought that was wonderful.

And then he called Humphrey in and told him that he'd decided he'd like to have Humphrey as Vice President, and there was the manful embraces and the pledging of one's fidelity.

F: Was this private?

V: Yes, this was private. Then the President and Humphrey walked outside to meet the press where there was some banter about all of it. And Senator Humphrey as usual was ebullient and exuberant and full of gaiety and charm and more than rising to the occasion. But it was all sort of an interlude in which, with typical Johnsonian fashion, he kept the press sort of half-guessing up until the last minute.

F: Have you time to finish up the convention?

V: Yes.

F: How much involved were you in managing the convention?

V: I was not at the actual convention.

F: This is where Marvin really emerged, isn't it?

V: Marvin Watson was not a member of the staff. He was brought in because the President had decided that the housing arrangements were being mis-managed, the thing was in a state of disrepair. So he had Walter Jenkins go there as his political operative and Marvin to be in charge of all the housekeeping chores--the housing, getting people to and from places and the general operational aspect of the convention. Marvin did a great job.

F: The President didn't particularly know Marvin at this time.

V: Oh, yes, absolutely. The President knew Marvin very well. Marvin had been with the President longer than any other man in the White House staff excepting Busby. He had been involved with the President over the years and was very close to him. He was living in Daingerfield, working for the Lone Star Steel Company at the time, but he had been well known to the President, had been involved in all of his campaigns. Indeed, I was far less intimate with President Johnson when I came to the White House than Marvin Watson. So Marvin did an excellent job and after the campaign was over, he brought Marvin in as appointments secretary, replacing me, and I went, involving myself in the speech writing coordination chores mainly, among other things.

F: Did you participate in any of the Atlantic City controversies, such as seating of the Mississippi delegation?

V: No, I stayed at the White House. I was appointments secretary at the time and so my place was at the White House to manage that end of the business. Walter Jenkins was handling that in Atlantic City. Marvin was not handling that, that was Walter Jenkins' chore. And there was constant communication between the President and Walter, I talked to Walter a good many times, relaying to him what the President was interested in. That's the way the communication was carried out. The fact that Marvin was there to help with the housekeeping chores relieved Walter of any pressures to get involved in anything other than political management at the convention.

F: Was the President satisfied with the way the convention went?

V: Yes, I think he was. I think he was very well satisfied. I think it went according to plan, with the least amount of disruption as conven-

tions are wont to have. Witness 1968. So I would have to say that with people like Governor David Lawrence involved it went smoothly. I know the President was very, very pleased with the selection of Senator Pastore as the keynoter. I remember that I watched that keynote speech with the President in his bedroom and he watched it with glee, sort of cheering on Pastore.

F: The bedroom at the White House?

V: Yes, the bedroom at the White House. Then of course, as you well remember, the President flew in by helicopter. I accompanied him on the evening that he was to make his acceptance speech.

F: I judge that was absolutely genuine and not synthetic, the reception that he got there; that you didn't have to whip it up.

V: Oh, no. That was a genuine thing.

F: He'd shown enough by then--

V: Yes, I think it was quite evident that a new and powerful force had taken over the country; that the people felt that this man in the White House was strong and sturdy and greatly experienced. Indeed, there are many historians who say that Johnson's really finest hours in the White House were in those parlous days between the assassination and the time that the country really began to feel it could breathe again; that the man in the White House knew what he was doing; that the country was in safe hands. The world then sort of relaxed, feeling that this new President was a man of great resolution and strength and imagination and that they could feel comfortable with him.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III]

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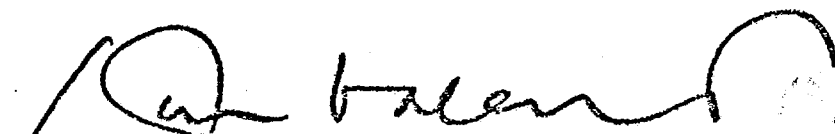
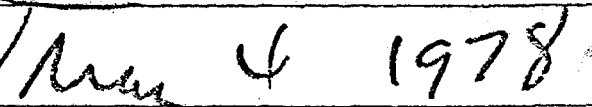
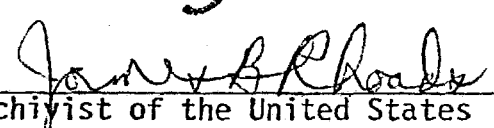
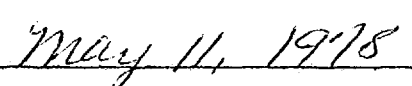
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