INTERVIEW V

DATE: July 12, 1972

INTERVIEWEE: JACK VALENTI

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

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

Tape 1 of 1

F: This is interview number five with Mr. Jack Valenti in his office in Washington, D.C. on July 12, 1972. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

Let's start this thing, Jack.

V: How about the Great Society speech?

F: Let's talk about the Great Society speech, and how that came about. Of course that's the tag for the whole thing.

V: Right. But the thing that really set it off was the speech of course at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Before that, I recall the genesis really of the Great Society as the rhetorical embrace for all the President chose to do. It began when I was handling a lot of the speeches for the President, and at that point the President was going to speak at a dinner at which there was an Eleanor Roosevelt Humanitarian Award. I got Dick Goodwin, who had been brought into the White House--I might parenthetically say that I first met Dick Goodwin when Bill Moyers brought him to my office. I was occupying a little small office next to Walter Jenkins' office. Bill Moyers brought him in and said, "Here's a fellow I think you ought to talk to, and you might get him to do some writing for the President." During the Kennedy Administration, Goodwin was an assistant to Assistant Secretary Martin, who was in charge of Latin America. First he was in the White House. He had run into a

personality clash with Ted Sorensen, which is the normal rivalry between two strong-willed men about who sits closest to the throne. Sorensen won that clash. Goodwin was sent from the White House to the State Department, where he got involved in Latin American relations, and, as I understand it, found himself in bitter contest with Dean Rusk and others in the department who felt that he was overstepping and overplaying his hand. Once again, Goodwin was exiled, this time to the Peace Corps, where he became a speech writer for Sargent Shriver.

It was in this kind of obscure post which someone said is as far as you can get on the outer edge of the government and still be in it that he was brought to my attention. I immediately liked Goodwin. He was a man of great literary attainment, with a marvelous capacious mind. Personally he's an un-prepossessing fellow. He turns you off that way, but I was really --

F: Almost saturnine in appearance?

V: Yes, that's true, not the most attractive looking man physically, but he is a kind of a near genius in his particular field, which is the political speech. I came to know him very well and to like him. I have to say in all honesty I thought Goodwin was probably trying to exert a little charm on me because I was his passkey back to the White House. I recognized that. I was not oblivious to it at all.

F: You don't find that objectionable though, do you?

V: No, I don't find that objectionable <u>if</u> the man has talent to offer, and I thought Goodwin did so I had no problem with his trying to sort of embrace me with all of his blandishments. We discussed literature with a good deal of zest.

Anyway, I suggested to the President that we bring Goodwin in as a speech writer after he had done a few speeches which I thought were absolutely first-rate.

F: Had the President known Goodwin when he was with Kennedy?

V: In a vague, obscure sort of way. But almost from the outset the President had an instinctual kind of recoiling from Goodwin. He had a feeling fixed neither in specifics nor fact that Goodwin was not the best influence and that Goodwin might at some time turn on him. He was unable to put this in more specifics, but it was that occult instinct of the President working overtime. He searched out Goodwin's character through some dimly lit passageways that I wasn't able to navigate at that time.

At any rate I asked Dick Goodwin to do a first draft of this Eleanor Roosevelt speech, and he came back with a corker, in my judgment. In this speech, the Eleanor Roosevelt Humanitarian Award, he went over in great detail about what the President wanted to do and said that this was the building of a Great Society. This was the first time that that phrase had surfaced.

Later on I found that a man named Graham Wallas had written a book in the early part of this century called The Great Society. I'm not sure where Goodwin retrieved that phrase. A lot of speculation has been brought to bear that it came from Wallas--Graham Wallas, not Henry Wallace--

F: I gather too that Barbara Ward somewhere in there made her little--

V: Yes, I think she used the phrase also. So there was some lack of connection with its actual creative source, but nonetheless the speech was excellent. I took it to the President and he liked it, but I made

the suggestion that I thought this phrase was so good that we ought to build a whole speech around it. The President concurred very quickly on that. I went back to Goodwin and Goodwin redrafted the Eleanor Roosevelt speech. He and I talked at that time about a new rostrum for this Great Society.

Peering through presidential speech appointments, we fastened on the University of Michigan, which I think was going to take place in April or May of 1964. Goodwin went to work on that.

In the meanwhile the President, sort of fondling and caressing this new phrase, surfaced it a couple of times himself in what I call Rose Garden speeches. It did not attract any kind of superlatives from the press, no one leaped on it, because it did not have a structure at that time. It was just a phrase.

F: Excuse me a minute, Jack, but had you before then tried to find some sort of a tag for the Johnson Administration? Had you been constantly trying for it or did it just come naturally?

V: Never really searching it out with great specific energy, though there was always the temptation with any President or administration, you want to find some nice umbrella that you can say in two or three words--New Frontier, New Deal, Fair Deal, New Freedom, and all that sort of business.

While we were looking for it, it did not occupy a great deal of our time. But the minute that this thing did surface in the Eleanor Roosevelt speech, it was evident that there was meaning in this phrase far beyond just the phrase "Great Society." I thought it had durability, I thought it was commodious, I think you could fit a lot of what we were trying to do within the curve of this phrase. Goodwin agreed.

The President agreed.

We fiddled with it over the next two or three months. I think the Eleanor Roosevelt speech was made in January or February. By early May, before we went to Ann Arbor we had the first fleshings of this Great Society speech.

F: Isn't this rather longer than usual to spend on a speech?

V: Oh, yes. But we didn't work on it by itself; it was involved with a lot of other speeches, but we were pointing toward this Ann Arbor commencement as being a time and a place to launch not just the Great Society phrase, but the embrace of the President's program--what he wanted to do as President, what he felt about this society, where he thought this country ought to go and how it ought to get there. And in truth to display the conscience of the Johnson Administration, the deep innermost feelings of this man, and the kind of leadership that he fully intended to give this country. So we knew before the speech was ever written that there was a possibility that this could be a very important document. Goodwin didn't work on it assiduously for about a month.

Now when the speech came forward, it didn't take me long to know that this was a jewel of a speech. I might parenthetically say that while sometimes Goodwin is a very prickly sort of fellow and you have to handle him as you would a sullen porcupine, I have yet to meet any man who can, with professionalism and lucidity and a kind of singing element, write a political speech like Dick Goodwin. He has no peer.

F: Is he primarily a technician or are his ideas--?

V: No, Dick is more than that. Dick is an idea man. He has great intellectual resources. He graduated first or second or third in Harvard Law School, was a clerk to Frankfurter, has always been fascinated with ideas and issues. He's also one of those rarities of a legal mind that has a rhetorical bent, and he is fascinated by words. He's also like any other normal speech writer who hates like hell to have any syllable touched by anybody. I can relate a lot of stories about Goodwin's almost frenzied attempt to protect the sanctity of his paragraphs against the onslaught of people like me, and even the President!

But at any rate he's a practitioner of the first order in this very difficult art form called the political speech.

Now the President liked the speech. It was a long speech and one of the things we had to do was to cut it back. At that point a number of the President's aides began to move in on this speech, and there was some difficulty in the staff about how we ought to structure it, and particularly what we ought to cut out. It was Goodwin's judgment that we ought not to cut very much, but we ought to leave it in because this would be the centerpiece. I tended to agree with that. I remember at one point I thought that we might cut back on the conservation part of this speech, but Goodwin convinced me that this would be wrong and I'm convinced that he was right. So I fought to retain that part in the speech.

At this point now we did a lot of work on the details of

it, polishing. The President was pleased with it, he felt that it really bespoke what he felt about this society, that it told in clear, and sometimes ringing, tones, what he felt was the direction he wanted to take in this country. So the speech was finally fastened down and it was delivered. Then of course it was caught up by the press. The phrase was then given garments and it was mantled now with some real substance. That's how phrases take on some import. If they stand there alone on stilts, just naked syllables, that's one thing, but when they are now codified and buttressed with real substantive programming, then it takes on a meaning, and that's why I think the Great Society caught fire at that time and it became a part of the President's program. It became a part of the press and its descriptive designation of Johnson's program.

F: Did the President have a sort of A to X, or A to Z, program, or did he sort of handle things pragmatically as they developed and move on to the next?

V: I think he had certain beliefs, certain programs, certain philosophies that he wanted to put into the law. I think first was human rights. I think that the centerpiece of that was the vote. He always believed that if you could give the black man the vote and secure his right to vote, that he would have political power and then from political power would flow all the other opportunities that any human being would want--social justice and economic aspirations, etc. So the whole human rights

program was in the forefront.

Second, the President was determined to move on Medicare, which was the business of giving health insurance to older people.

Number three, he had a great feeling about conservation in this country and wanted to move that forward.

Number four, he was convinced that if he could really get the economy in terrific shape he could do all the things he wanted to do. As a result he spent a lot of time on budgetary matters, fiscal matters, and made sure that the budget was as lean as possible; that we constructed business incentives, that we created opportunities for the economy to soar.

In foreign policy, he was a great believer in regional arrangements. He believed that there ought to be the regional apparatus to shore up our problems abroad, but he was determined that he would not allow this country -- and here he felt parallel to Kennedy -- to sit idly by while aggressive forces were unleashed around the world. He intended to bring the might and force and power of the U.S. to bear and to baffle these attempts to overrun other countries.

I think all of these were in his mind. Now he didn't have a one, two, three, four, five -- we do it tomorrow program. But in the legislative field of these various issues, they were all there and many times they ran in tandem and parallel before it was all done.

I left out one other thing. Education. I think this was

the area in which, next to human rights, he gave most attention. He was determined somehow to break this ancient log jam which had really just totally baffled everyone up to this time of how you bring in aid to education and not get assaulted by the church and state problem. It was done ingeniously by not giving money to schools and to districts, but giving money to students and it broke the log jam. And of course the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is probably one of the great landmark pieces of legislation in the history of the Congress. The President felt good about that.

That was his thrust, I think, in human rights and education, in the conservation area and in the economy and in the Medicare field--the five-pronged attack that he intended to make, and did and won.

F: On something like human rights, did he lay out a long-range campaign? We know, for instance, that he always moved for the possible and was consummate in that, and then would move on to something else. But would he say that we'll have to pass this and then move on to that and on to that, for several years down the line.

V: Oh, yes. He was a pragmatist but he was also a master chess player. I don't believe he ever did anything without thinking four or five moves in advance. I was never aware of the President's moving precipitously to gain a small advantage without thinking what assets and liabilities a small advantage would burden him or hem him in. I think he always looked down the road.

Now when he came to the Presidency there was languishing in the Congress the Kennedy Civil Rights Act. He got that through very quickly, but that Civil Rights Act did not really fasten down a number of the things that he wanted to bring to fruition. The vote! So he really had kind of a three-tiered attack: one was the Civil Rights Act of '64; the Voting Rights Act of '65; and then later on, of course, the Equal Housing Act of '68. But he pushed through the '64 act knowing the next mountain that had to be climbed, and already he was thinking about it. And so immediately upon passing the '64 act, he had already begun to move on the legislative architecture for the Voting Rights Act. I would say I don't think the President ever moved capriciously. I think he always kept his eye on the distant objective and not the one nearest him.

F: While we're on this voting rights and housing and so on, Everett Dirksen turned 180 degrees on almost every one of these. No doubt the President had a hand in that.

V: Yes, he did. I suppose history will have to record a rather unique relationship between these two men. I always found it both amusing and rather warm. Outwardly they fought each other in print, but Dirksen and Johnson were men who had genuine rapport with each other. The President was very, very careful never to surprise Dirksen and never to humiliate him, always to keep him informed and always to keep him close. For two reasons: one, he liked him personally; and,

two, he realized that he needed Dirksen on a number of issues where Dirksen could be malleable, pliable. Many a time these two would gather by themselves in the White House to check over things.

Early in my White House career the President sort of let some men know that I was to be the man that they would talk to in the White House, to give them instant access to him, and in a sense I would sort of service their account. One of these men was Dirksen, so I got to know him famously. And the day would hardly pass without at least one phone call from Dirksen. I can hear that sonorous voice, "Jack, how's the boss today?" I'd say, "Well, Senator,he's fine." And he would say: "Well, tell him that I'm going to sort of cut him up a little bit on the floor tomorrow. I want him to know about it. I'm going to touch him up a little bit on this," and he would tell me how he intended just to rake the President over. Then Dirksen would rise in all of his resplendent fury on the floor of the Senate and denounce Johnson with all sorts of obloquies and incantations of evil and just about everything else. Then he would call up that afternoon, having delivered himself this oration, and say, "I'd like to see the boss." It was one of those things, I never had to check back with Johnson on anything that had to do with Dirksen, so I'd say: "Well, I sort of think we can fit you in about six o'clock today, Senator." "That'll be fine. I'll be over, the usual place." We'd bring him in by the Diplomatic Reception Room so nobody would know he was around.

He and the President would gather on the second floor of the Mansion, go upstairs on the west hall, sitting by that arch window that looks over the Rose Garden, and many times I was present, as the only other person. Sometimes they'd have a drink together. They would sit and chew the fat, reminisce, tell stories, laugh, and really enjoy themselves. Then they would sit down about a half hour after they arrived and really begin to parley, in which the President was tyring to get Dirksen to do certain things and Dirksen would do it, exacting his price for it. I used to laugh. I thought Everett Dirksen peopled commissions with his people more than anybody I ever saw in my life. You couldn't name a commission where there wasn't a Dirksen man on it somewhere.

I remember one time the Senator called me and said, "Jack, I'd like to get this man -- and he gave me the name of a man -- on the Battlefield Monuments Commission". I checked out this fellow and found out that he was a man of some disreputable character and that he had been known to veer off what is known as the straight path of righteousness from time to time. The FBI had sent me some information on him when I asked, because we usually do check people out, and I took this to the President. He said, "I don't want to get into it. Just tell Everett what it is that you've found. If he still wants to put the man on there, I'll be glad to do it, making it clear of course that he's Everett's selection."

When I called the Minority Leader back again and told him, I could hear the (sound of Dirksen throat clearing), and he said, "Why don't we just hold that up for a bit, Jack, and I'll be back to you."

But that's the way they operated. It was a unique arrangement because they could negotiate. Dirksen from time to time would respond not from out of any political interest or out of any personal interest, but because he believed it was in the long-range best interest of this country. These ranged all the way from civil rights to the consular agreement that we made with the Soviet Union, where he was very much opposed to that and the President brought him around on that, by convincing him that this was really in our interest.

Dirksen was not a man of rigid dogma. Like Johnson, he was able to see the long view. I really think he was an extraordinary human being. Some of the young idealists might be a little bit alien to him as not their sort of person, but in this cruel and tormented way we have of governing ourselves, Dirksen was really quite a unique man. He and Johnson came together at the right time in the right place, and a lot of good things happened in this country -- were able to be passed because these two men were able to negotiate out their differences.

F: Let's get back to the inner White House. Did you have much hauling and pulling, knifing, etc.? You've got some pretty high-powered,

ambitious people here. Moyers and Goodwin and Busby.

V: Yes, you always have that. You always have when you're dealing in a place where you're sitting amid power and the celebration of power, you're going to have the pulling and hauling. You're going to have bruised egos, you're going to have a kind of Machiavellian jostling and crawling and pushing and vaulting and all of the things that go with this kind of an operation. I think it's important to realize that practically all of these fellows who work in the White House are men of some ego, and they are all looking for ways to enhance their own reputations as well as their own use of power.

I think Bill Moyers was probably the most facile in this. While he was very young, he had spent a lot of time working for Johnson in the Peace Corps, and I think he understood how power works in Washington better than any of us in the White House, mainly because he had been working at it for a long time.

F: Was he at all preacherous? I know his background.

V: I don't think so. I think the preacher robe that Bill wore was an asset to him because it tended to lull people into a false sense of security, I mean, give them the idea that this was a nice young man. I think Mrs. Johnson always rather liked Bill, one reason was this religious background; the fact that he was an ordained Baptist minister had a kind of soothing effect.

But Bill was a technician in the use of power. He knew how to work it. He stationed a lot of proteges in all departments of

the government, and he had his intelligence operation better situated than anybody that I've seen in the White House. I don't say that pejoratively, I say it admiringly because it gave him the most precious asset you can have, and that is knowledge, information, what's going on. If you know it first, you're in a position of great power.

F: I presume he had the best lines to the so-called Kennedy faction.

V: That's true because that stemmed from the Peace Corps. And the Peace Corps was a seabed, a breeding ground for young men in the government. Many times the President would say, "Let's get some young men. I want to put this guy in this job or that guy in that job." I knew no one in Washington so I had very little access to bringing anybody in, but Bill had dozens and dozens and dozens of friends in the Peace Corps and he would venture their names. And they were all good men. As a result they moved into power and they owed him their jobs. And this is the lever that you use in Washington. Anybody that wants to exercise power has to have his men, loyal to him, in those places where power can be utilized.

I think that Bill and Horace Busby probably clashed very early, for reasons which are not so profound. Buzz had been with the President the longest, his oldest and trusted aide, and probably next to Goodwin the best writer I ever saw. Buzz is a philosophical man; he's not happy in the corridors of raw naked power. He'd rather philosophize than brutalize. He thought a good deal, and while this is very useful to a President, it doesn't help

you if you get in open conflict with some colleague who has shored up all the sides of the circle. So there had sprung up, it seemed to me, between Busby and Moyers a kind of an animus that I suspect is still alive. Buzz felt that he was unfairly being put upon by Moyers, Moyers was out to shore up his position, and as a result they collided.

Later on, when Marvin Watson came in and at the President's behest began to take over as kind of a housekeeper of the White House, he and Moyers never saw eye-to-eye because they were in a political way furlongs apart. And so it was kind of Busby and Watson against Moyers, and this went on for some time.

Buz was in and out of the White House, in a bit of pique he resigned and came back. I was very sad about that because I really think that Busby is an enormously valuable man.

F: What piqued him?

V: A feeling that he was neglected, that the President had put him aside after ascending to the White House when he was the one who was with him in all the bleak years. So I think that affected him.

F: Was Marvin abrasive, or was he just dogged?

V: No, Marvin was not abrasive. Marvin was tough. Marvin was able, competent, and a man who, when the President gave him an order, carried out. Now, Marvin did not spend much time in the niceties of telling a man no, and what was a kind of a steady progression toward his objective in Marvin's mind was abrasiveness and brusqueness

on the part of others with whom there was an encounter. I found Marvin one of the most decent men I've ever known, quiet, strong, always courteous, never mean, but a tough, hard man, carrying out the instructions of the President.

I think on that score you have to count him a very competent man in his own way, as competent as Moyers, but they were different political cats and they operated differently. The one thing that Watson did not have was an appreciation of the press. He just turned his back on them, while Moyers, far more facile and skillful in this, used the press to his personal advantage. Again, I don't say that pejoratively. Whereas Watson did not spend any time trying to make the press jovial, he gave them short shrift because they were not part of what he considered to be his assignment. So there was this animosity.

But this goes on in every administration. I can't believe that any White House would operate without this interplay of egos and clashings of ambitions, all sort of like satellites circling the sun.

F: Did the departure of Walter Jenkins at a somewhat crucial time, and I'm beginning to believe all times are crucial, cause any kind of inner scrambling here, or did the routine just sort of fill up the hole?

V: If Walter had stayed I think it might have been different in many ways, because Walter was the number one man. No one questioned this, no one debated it, and no one resented it. Walter was a

self-effacing man. He did not seek the spotlight; therefore, no one became irritated or jealous of him. But he was the most intimate man to the President, and the President really relied on him so much; he was the hardest working man there. I think as long as Walter would have been there, there would not have been as much jostling for power as there was after he left because he did leave a vacuum.

On the day that Walter resigned, the President immediately said he was appointing Bill Moyers to take his place. What he wanted to do was to show that there was a continuity among his staff, but Moyers never attained that kind of intimacy that Walter Jenkins had, nor did Moyers move uncontested by other members of the staff to that role.

My own personal part in all of this was, I really wasn't looking to build up any power; in fact, I must say that I didn't even think I would stay there longer than a year, I was ready to go back. I had a business in Houston that was very good to me and I wanted to get back to it. So I took the position that I was to help the President as long as I could, I had no interest in my own personal position in the power infighters. This was both a disadvantage and advantage. It was a disadvantage in that when the crunches came from time to time with the press and inside the government, I did not have allies because I was alone. The advantage was that most of the other staff recognized that I was not seeking any personal glory for myself, and therefore I was

able many times to smooth out problems within the staff and I could take to the President the conflicting views and try to give him an objective assessment. Or I could take to the President some particular plea by a staff member that had been turned down by the President and they would come to me to say "see if you can move this again."

F: There's really great strength in a man who doesn't want anything.

V: I'm not saying I didn't want anything, but I wasn't looking for what others at that time were looking. I must say if I ever went back into the White House I would know how to handle myself a lot better and I'd probably play it differently, but then I probably wouldn't have the same kind of relationship with the President as I had. I felt intensely loyal, still feel that way, I felt like I would subordinate my own personal claims on glory to what the President wanted. The minute you do that, you're going to find yourself in a difficult position. You're going to find yourself getting a bad press, you're going to find yourself getting buffeted from time to time, but that didn't disturb me at the time because I felt like that I was there for one purpose: to serve the President.

But I don't find internecine warfare in the White House, the Johnson White House, so unusual. I just think it's a normal virus that infects every White House, and like a wild contagion--

F: I've seen a lot of faculty groups like that.

V: Of course, you see all that.

F: On that phrase that the press picked up and made so much out of, that you could sleep better with Lyndon Johnson as President, was that off the cuff, did you clear that with the President, or what was his reaction? Was it amusement or--?

V: It happened in early 1965. I had come from the advertising world. I was asked to address the American Advertising Association in Boston, and I asked the President if I could be off to make the speech. He said fine; he did not ask to look at my speech, I didn't show it to him. But I wrote a speech about the Presidency and the President. It was a laudatory speech, but as I've said many times, I don't expect anybody to think that a White House aide is going to go out making speeches and denounce the President. That has never been done before, and I don't think it ever will be done.

I said a number of things which were laughed at but now have gained credence. I was pointing out that I thought Johnson had extra glands. Well, that was laughed at. I noticed in The New York Times today, somebody was talking about one of the aspirants for President saying that what he lacked was the extra glands that you need to be President. And it's true. I said it in kind of a metaphoric sense, but it's true.

But the line that really unleashed all of this laughter on me and ridicule and humiliation that I suffered, sometimes not so silently, I finished it off by saying--I was quoting from the famous speech made by Churchill in 1940 when France fell and

Churchill made this speech beamed to the French people, that famous one starting off, "Francais ce moi Churchill," in which he pointed out that all was not lost; to have high hopes; that while things looked tough now, they were going to be all right; that Britain would never desert them. He ended his speech by saying, "So, Frenchmen, sleep well to gather your strength for the morning, for the morning shall come." I ended my speech by saying, "That's the way I feel about Johnson. I think that he's going to make sure that the morning always come for the American people and there's not going to be darkness. In many ways this is why, when I go to bed at night, I sleep better, because Lyndon Johnson is in the White House."

I must say, in my naivete, I thought that was a nice flourish. I really thought that was a pretty good way to end that speech. To my amazement I found out that that wasn't the way the press took it. They copied the speech in the White House, and George Reedy called me up and he said, "What the hell did you say in that speech?" I said, "What do you mean, George?" He said, "There's a run on that speech; everybody wants it." And I thought to myself, "Uh-oh, they would not want it to tell me what a great speech that was, that's something else now." And I couldn't figure out what was wrong.

F: What have I done!

V: But the general impression was that this was a sycophant speech, full of laudatory phrases. I never will forget one of the former

Kennedy men still in the White House, Lee White, sent me a speech that Ted Sorensen had made about John Kennedy; in a similar setting some place outside the White House he made this speech. When I read the Ted Sorensen speech about Kennedy, Lee White had affixed a little note saying, "If you just change the names, this is your speech." And it was true, about how the great courage that he exhibited and that few Presidents were standing alone on the bulwark and the ramparts of freedom--you know, that kind of thing. But nobody laughed at that.

My own judgment was that at this time this was a convenient way to get at the President; by ridiculing one of his close aides, they could make him look bad. I must say the President was marvelous about it, in that he never said anything. He just didn't object to it, or didn't admire it; he just did not say anything about it and left me to my own devices. But I appreciated that because I felt like that I had let him down by giving the press a flank attack on the President.

I reread that speech the other day and I stand by it. I think it might be a little bit overblown in some of the prose in it, but that's the way I write and that's the way I speak, and I can't--

F: And also you need to recreate the exhilaration of 1965, which was a vintage year.

V: That's true. But mainly the speech reads well and it's kind of an assessment of the Presidency. I think a lot of the things that

were said in there are true about a President. I would not rewrite that last paragraph. I think the description with Churchill was apt. But it's the one phrase that was lifted out of that speech and it has been linked like an albatross's necklace around me and there's not much I can do about it.

F: Jack, you're an old newsman yourself. Was the press unduly critical of Johnson? We know that they were getting pretty critical of Kennedy at the time he was shot, and that there's always an almost natural and inexorable conflict between press and President. They have to be by the nature of the two jobs, I think. But did you feel that they went out of their way to work Johnson over, either through his staff or directly?

V: It's hard to say. I think the president felt that way, and I think that on the part of some members of the press that was probably true. But in all candor, I have to say that like most conflicts there was error on both sides. Let me cite for you what I think are some of the things the President did that he should not have done.

First, I think he really didn't give sufficient attention to the human side of a reporter's life. Some of the festering and the torment and frustrations that later began to take ugly Gargoyle shapes and become more evil all began rather innocently. I think, if I had to trace it back, it all started with the President's trips to the Ranch. Now a reporter has a family and he covers the White House all day long, and if he knows in advance he has got

to go somewhere he can plan for it. But when he doesn't know he has to go somewhere and it comes to him abruptly, causing him to dismantle his own personal plans, he becomes a little bit furious about it. The President had a habit of holding close to his vest his travel plans. A President has a right to do that, I suppose. Johnson believed that if he made a plan a month in advance and then for some reason couldn't keep it, it would look like a crisis. He wanted to keep his options open. I don't quarrel with that. Yet out of that was bred this great poisonous, and many times venomous relationship.

The way it would go would be this. About Monday or Tuesday somebody would ask the press secretary, "Is the President going to the Ranch this weekend?" "Well, we don't have any notice on that." And then Wednesday and Thursday would come and they'd say, "Is he going to the Ranch?" "Well, there's a possibility." "Is he going or isn't he?" "We don't know." And the press secretary would be after the President and the President would say, "Well, it looks like I can't go." This is Friday morning. "I've got a meeting with Rusk and McNamara." And then Friday afternoon there would be an abrupt change and they'd say, "Get your bags out, we're leaving at seven o'clock tonight for Texas." This really would absolutely send those newsmen off the scope, as we say--they would just climb the wall with fury. Maybe the wife had planned a dinner party, now they've got to leave on three or four or five hours notice, or maybe sometimes ten hours notice.

This was a terrifying kind of imbalance in the relationship, and they felt it very deeply and it infuriated them. Reporters are only human. Finally, this happens enough and if something comes up and the President is supposed to be driving fast down Highway 1, or whatever it was, instead of passing it off he decides to write a story about it. They sit around in Austin and Fredericksburg and fume about and decide, "By God, we'll fix him, we'll really work this over." I don't know that that happened, but it's a perfectly human kind of a result.

I remonstrated with the President any number of times, but this is one of those things that he felt strongly about--he did not want to reveal his plans in advance. It caused great problems. I suspect that after about three or four of these on-again, off-again trips that somewhere--it might have been in the west lobby or in the Black Steer or in the National Press Club--somebody said, "Ye Gods, there's a credibility gap in the White House," and thus was born that phrase. And then it grew. Then everything that the President would do,they adjusted it back into this credibility gap.

You hear to this hour people talking. When Henry Cabot Lodge was thought about in the newspapers as a replacement to go back out to Vietnam, they asked the President at a press conference: "Are you thinking about a replacement," and he said, "There's no thought given today to any replacement." Now the President's attitude would be he told the truth, because he didn't give any

thought that day because the previous day he'd already decided to send Lodge back. Now that's a finely tuned kind of a thing, but the press then felt like he'd cheated them. When the Lodge appointment was announced, I remember in early '64, and I think the press was wrong on this particular thing, they were floating in the papers the idea of how big the budget was going to be, and the President in some press conference was saying they were trying to get it down below $110 billion. That was true. He was meeting day and night with Kermit Gordon to get it below $110 billion. But he had also had a meeting with Senator Harry Byrd, Sr.--I remember, because I sat in on that meeting--where he told Senator Byrd he wanted to get his tax cut out of the Finance Committee, and Byrd said, "I just don't see how we can do it. That budget's too high, we can't have any tax cut." And then they talked some more and Johnson said, "Well, suppose I got it under $100 billion?" "Well," said Byrd, "if you get it under $100 billion, we might do some business." Johnson then knew if he could get it under $100 billion that he could really make it go.

So he and Kermit Gordon worked 'round the clock night after night after night. They really used the butcher knife, as well as the scalpel, to this budget, and they got it down to $97.4 or $99.7, or whatever it was, billion.

When that budget was announced, the press said that the President had deceived them. He hadn't at all. Everything he said then was really true. He didn't know he could get that budget under

$100 billion.

So, you see, there's justice on both sides. I think the President was wrong in his capricious treatment of the press insofar as trips were concerned. I think the press was wrong on this budget thing and others where the President could only tell them the truth, and he couldn't speculate on what he might do.

As a result these things grow. And, you know, it's a funny thing how a sore that might heal. But if you keep picking at it then the scab goes off and it comes back on and it finally becomes infected and really becomes a problem. I think the President's press relations deteriorated the same way. We just picked at that scab so much that for reasons that are now lost in obscurity it got worse and worse and worse and finally collapsed in obloquy and recriminations and all the other shabby accolades one gives to the other.

F: It's the sort of thing that you feel like if you could just get hold of the situation and run it yourself, you could work it out.

V: That's true. I always felt that the President ought to do more live press conferences, I thought he was excellent in them. He recoiled from that. I really don't know why. Maybe he felt that that Kennedy phantom which ran down every corridor in that White House all the years we were there would come alive like Banquo's ghost at every one of these press conferences and they would compare him unfavorably with Kennedy.

After I left the White House, they finally got the President

out from behind that rostrum and put a lavaliere mike around him and he sort of prowled the East Room, and he was a wow! He was an absolute smash success. The whole business of his communcation with the people I think affected him. You know the old cliché, but it was true, that in a small room with a hundred people or ten people Johnson was magnificent--the most persuasive man I have ever met. But when he went before television, something happened. He took on a presidential air, he fused a kind of a new Johnson which wasn't the real Johnson.

F: He ought to have been the greatest fireside chatter in the history of TV.

V: He became kind of stiff and foreboding. I worked a lot in various memoranda and conversations with him to get him to use television in a different way. I was opposed to the teleprompters, I just think they were wrong. He was much better when he was speaking from notes. And I tried to get him to go on television for, say, ten minutes. I used to think if you could go on at, say, 6:50 in the evening where you wouldn't commandeer any program but take the last ten minutes of the 7 o'clock or the 6:30 news and then speak about one subject, maybe it might be "Why are we in Vietnam, I want to talk to you about that tonight." "Let me tell you why this human rights legislation is so important to us." And really use the television not as a crisis medium, not as an exhortation medium, but as an informational and educational medium--the President teaching the people, guiding the people as to what was important. I suggested

in a memorandum once that he go on television on four successive weeks with these ten minute speeches: one, why are we in Vietnam; number two, why it's important to the long-range security of the United States that we stay there; number three, how is it going? What are we doing?; number four, what's going to happen post-war in Vietnam? What are we looking for there? So that you could bring this to the people, to use television. There's Johnson, speaking right into the camera without use at least on camera of the tele-prompters, speaking softly, speaking himself, and really talking about these things, educating the people, inspiring them. I never could get him to do that. Each President has to determine how he's going to use that medium.

F: You must have discussed this people like Robert Kintner and Frank Stanton.

V: I discussed it with a number of people, but I never discussed it with Frank. Bob Kintner came in as I was leaving the White House, so this was before Bob came onboard. At one time I did get Stuart Rosenberg and another gentleman through Ed Weisl, who had connections with the movie industry--I wanted to get two top producers to come in and really handle the President's television appearances, not to tell him what to say or how to say it, but to stage it so that the lighting was right, the setting was right, and you would get the most out of this.

We had one meeting, Stuart Rosenberg and I can't remember the other man's name--Stuart Rosenberg, incidentally, is the motion

picture director who did "Cool Hand Luke" and other top films. He's a very able man. We met at the White House with Mr. Rosenberg and his colleague and went over some of the things that we thought ought to be done and he was telling us his ideas. He met the President.

And then he was coming back for another meeting the next time and there was a story in the paper--I don't know, some one line or two lines, that the President has gotten two Hollywood producers to help him on television. The President became infuriated at what he thought was a leak and we had to terminate the arrangement. I really remonstrated with him, tried desperately to keep that from happening, pointing out that you cannot keep that a secret, somebody's going to know it sooner or later. What difference does it make!

F: Robert Montgomery never hurt Eisenhower.

V: At any rate, those were things that the President, being a human being, had some problems with. So that scheme of mine aborted, and as a result we never really professionalized the TV use. There's no question that TV is the best way to communicate with people if you're the President. I don't even think that President Nixon is using it correctly. He only goes on to announce some crisis things or decisions. I think it could be used as an educational medium where the President really is talking to the people about things.

I feel saddened about that.

F: As you began to develop a new staff in the White House with people like McPherson and Califano coming in, did the old ones feel that

they were being superseded?

V: It may have been so, but I don't think so. I think in the case of Harry McPherson, everyone admired him, a quiet and gentle, poetic, brilliant man. He came in of course as special counsel, which was a specialized office. The rest of us were not lawyers so that didn't affect us.

I know that when George Reedy left the White House, George was suffering from hammer-toes and also suffering from a buffeting around. I don't think George ever really felt comfortable in that job and I don't think that he did the job that the President wanted done. George is a rather ponderous fellow and he'd tend to preach and be pedantic to the press instead of really handling their problems. The President knew that he had to leave and this was a convenient way to do it.

I know the President called me in to tell me that, "I'd make you press secretary, Jack, but I'm afraid that you're too close to me and the press would cut you up and destroy you. I don't want that to happen, I need you here, and I don't want you destroyed so I'm going to make Bill Moyers press secretary. I think he can handle them better than you can. They won't be in a mood to destroy him as they would be in a mood to destroy you."

I'm not too sure that I agreed to that. I have to say in all honesty I thought I could have done a good job as press secretary, but I didn't quarrel with the President on that. I didn't seek the job but when he mentioned it to me I think I would have taken it.

I had recommended Joe Califano to the President as a replacement for Moyers. He was an assistant to McNamara. The President asked Bill and me what we thought about it and I was very much in favor of it. I didn't know Joe well, but what I'd seen of him told me that he was a very bright and able man. So when Califano came over, I don't believe there was any jealousy there. There was no one on the staff that the President thought would go into that particular job, which is a kind of a foreman or traffic cop on the domestic areas, and Califano did a marvelous job. I don't know that there was any kind of jealousy there on these two particularly.

F: Were you in on that Festival of the Arts?

V: Oh, yes! Yes, indeed.

F: Could you tell me about that?

V: A rather interesting man was brought in by the President through one of the President's junior assistants, Dick Nelson -- his professor at Princeton was a historian of international renown, Eric Goldman -- to kind of come in and furnish a bridge to the intellectual community as Arthur Schlesinger had done under Kennedy. I think that's a pretty good idea -- to have some kind of resident intellectual, I see nothing wrong with it.

Goldman was a man of great imagination and bombarded the President with a great many memos, some of which turned out to be

very good. It was his idea on Presidential Scholars, for example, which I thought was an excellent idea and I pushed for it and it came into being. Goldman and I were involved in the setting up of the White House Fellows, which I think was an idea from John Gardner. So he was very useful.

He came up with the idea of having this Festival of the Arts, and it struck me as being something good. Those of us who had a kind of literary rapport felt good about this, to bring artists to the White House. None of us realized the depth of feeling about Vietnam, and also the tawdry lengths that some people would go to in impoliteness and incivility. It just never occurred to us that that would be the case.

So the White House Festival began to take shape. All during this time, as it began to take a more formalized shape, we began to hear rumblings of discontent and some people were going to use it as a rostrum for protest. Then the President became uneasy and anxious. And of course since I was the one who had pushed the idea with the President, I was his target. He admonished me from time to time that this was going to be a failure, and I told him that it wasn't, that we were on top of it.

I began to have some anxious moments because I realized there was no way to really be proof against unruly happenings. So Goldman and I would have meeting after meeting after meeting, and he began to get nervous himself.

Finally the great day dawned, and the White House Festival of

Arts took place. Now the interesting thing of it is that in a sense it was a success, except two incidents occurred, really miniscule and not at all that important, but they were lifted out of their obscurity and brought to the front page. "Robert Lowell sends a letter saying 'I'm not coming.'" And of course that stirred up everybody. And the President was furious at that, and rightly so. Not so much at Lowell, he didn't care whether Lowell was there or not, but the very fact that he would be impolite.

And then a man named Dwight Macdonald, of whom I had read but didn't know, made an unmitigated ass of himself. I must say that I'd never met him before, and when I first met him the one thing I noticed about him was that he needed to gargle with Lavoris. When I later began to read more of his prose, I found it indistinguishable from his breath at the time. I just was upset by this man because I've never met a man with less civility, with less sense of good judgment about how you handle yourself when you're a guest in somebody's house. He padded around the White House lawn with a petition denouncing the President; he got about seven or eight people to sign it. I remember, and I'll never forget it to my undying pleasure, that I was talking to Charlton Heston on the south grounds and Macdonald shuffled over and stuck this petition under Heston's face and wanted him to sign it. Heston looked at it and then Heston just ate his ass out, called him a stupid man, that he had no sense of propriety and this was no way to act. And then he gave Macdonald precise directions as to what he could do with this petition, and

they were very precise. Macdonald wandered off. But he was trailed by newsmen who were picking all of this up.

So what happened, the White House Festival of the Arts became a celebration of protesters against Vietnam intruding on the White House and disrupting, etc. As a result the thing then became tarnished. It was as if somebody takes a big black paintbrush with Spred Satin paint to make wide swaths across a work of art.

The President was hurt by this because he felt like it was unfair. And he was right. It was unfair.

F: Did you get the feeling that at that point he turned his back on the intellectual scene?

V: No. He still consulted so-called intellectuals. I think McGeorge Bundy was an intellectual, Galbraith was writing speeches for the President. But I think he began to feel a sense of wariness about academia and whether or not you could trust people just to be civil. I don't know that it soured him on "the intellectual" community, but it made him very wary.

F: Thank you, Jack.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview V]

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

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of Jack Valenti

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Jack Valenti of Washington, D.C. do hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of personal interviews conducted on June 14, 1969, October 18, 1969, February 19, 1971, March 3, 1971, and July 12, 1972 in Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcripts shall be available for use by researchers as soon as they have been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

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

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

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

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

Donor

May 4 1978
Date

James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

May 11, 1978
Date