INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: LEW WASSERMAN

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: LBJ Library

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F: Mr. Wasserman, I think what we need to do to get started is to tell how you first got in an LBJ orbit?

W: I first got in the LBJ orbit indirectly when he ran for Congress. Edwin Weisl, who was a dear friend of the President's and at that point in time was attorney and an old friend of mine. He was our attorney corporately and my personal attorney in the East.

F: I've interviewed both Ed, Jr., and Ed, Sr., incidentally.

W: I'm referring to Ed, Sr.

F: Yes.

W: And he came along and said he wanted contributions for some fellows running for Congress and, subsequently, contributions for some fellows running for the Senate.

F: How far back does this go?

W: Well, let me see now.

F: Oh, generally, I mean.

W: Oh, it's in the fifties. On some occasion we happened to be in Washington together in the fifties, and he said, "Wouldn't you like to meet this fellow you've been supporting all this period of time?" And I thought that was a pretty good idea. So we went by, and he

introduced me to Senator Johnson.

F: Had he become the majority leader by this time?

W: I think it was just at about that time.

F: What was the meeting like?

W: Well, it was a typical meeting with the President. He was very gracious, very outgoing, and from my viewpoint we seemed to hit it off immediately. We became friendly after that.

F: Go back a moment. How did Ed, Sr. sell you on this?

W: He didn't have to sell me. He was a good friend of mine, and he'd asked for help for individuals around the country, and he just helped them, that's all.

It's akin to what's happening now where there's an ex-member of the President's staff, Jimmy Jones, who's now a congressman. Well, Jimmy dropped me a note when he first ran for Congress and I helped him, and he lost. And then he ran again, and I helped him, and he suddenly won, you know. I had met him when he was working for the President.

F: Did you have any idea at that first meeting you were looking on anything more than just another senator?

W: No, no. I did not.

F: Did you stay fairly close to him after that point, or was he just somebody else that was recommended to you?

W: Well, I wouldn't say fairly close, because of the distance. I'm based primarily in California and do a lot of traveling both foreign and domestic. But in 1960 we were all

active, of course, in the campaign, and I was one of those who was absolutely convinced he would not take the second place on the ticket.

F: Did you do anything to help him get ready for the 1960 convention in Los Angeles?

W: Well, we all did something. There was a heck of a lot to do. The 1960 convention was totally unlike the 1964 convention.

F: You knew pretty well in Los Angeles that he was on the outside looking in, as far as the nomination.

W: No question. No question about it.

F: Did you go to the convention?

W: No. I didn't go to the convention, because I was disappointed in the fact that he was on the outside.

F: Yes.

W: But then the next morning, when he'd agreed to run for the vice presidency, why, we did get involved directly in the campaign.

F: What'd you do then?

W: Worked for the ticket in the state of California.

F: Did you see much of Mr. Johnson in that campaign?

W: Well, as much as one would see in any campaign, unless you are directly involved in traveling with the campaign. I think, at that particular point in time, I probably saw more of President Kennedy, because he seemed to be concentrating more on the West Coast than President Johnson.

F: I remember Bobby Kennedy later telling a story in my presence, about he couldn't decide whether to stay in California or go to Oklahoma right at the end of the campaign. California needed attention. Oklahoma needed attention. They finally decided California was more important. So, as Bobby says, "We blew both of them."

W: Yes, yes. But they were quite troubled about California, and they were right.

F: Did you see him much while he was Vice President?

W: Some. I saw him a great deal more after 1963. I was back in Washington several times during 1961 and 1962 having to do with some President Club activity with Arthur Krim on the West Coast and some meetings and some affairs at the White House. We saw him then.

F: Let's talk a little bit about something we haven't explored, and that is the role of the entertainment industry in politics. I've got a right-wing friend who told me recently when he was out at my house and Melvyn Douglas was on, "Well, I never can tolerate Melvyn Douglas, because he got into politics under Roosevelt." You have more or less sat through this whole business of the people in entertainment working in politics. On the part of the director, the bosses so-called, do they care which sides they take? I've read, of course, all the stories on Louis B. Mayer and his friendship with high political types and so on, but I wonder what is the attitude at the executive level.

W: Well, I think the executives have matured enough so that they recognize that we have a two-party system. In California, we have more than a two-party system.

F: Yeah.

W: And they don't care much. I think that our primary concern is that the membership in our

industry become active. I'm not talking about the candidates being active. I'm talking about the few hundred thousand people who work in the industry around the United States. Historically, [they] have tended to avoid being active, because they had some concern about [it] helping or hurting them, as the case may be. But things have changed a great deal since the days of Mr. Mayer. The studios no longer control, as they did in those days, artists or directors or producers, as the case may be.

F: And, really, their politics aren't so much a concern of yours.

W: Not at all. One of our senior executives, a member of our board of directors, was very active in the Nixon campaigns, and I guess I'm identified as a Johnson Democrat, and yet we sit in the same meetings.

F: Now, you mentioned Arthur Krim. Is there kind of an inter-corporation or inter-studio fraternity that talks about these problems?

W: Yes, I would imagine that it's comparable to a university or a social club. You tend to meet on a more regular basis with people in your industry, and reality being what it is, you tend to meet with them at the particular level that you occupy; so that develops a fraternity relationship. I've known Arthur twenty-five or thirty years since he first started in the industry. And as a result, his career progressed and mine progressed--we hold similar titles in different corporations--why, you tend to have the fraternity spirit.

F: Now you mentioned that you came into this originally through Ed Weisl, Sr. When did you sort of become committed to Lyndon Johnson, and why?

W: Well, actually, I was committed to supporting Lyndon Johnson when he ran for the Senate. As an outcast, as it were, I don't live in Texas. But I consider him a friend, and

one does go through life supporting his friends. I guess I became totally committed when President Johnson came to California in early 1964. He came out there with Lynda--Mrs. Johnson was ill at the time--to honor a commitment for a dinner that had originally been scheduled for President Kennedy. We became rather friendly then, and then I got involved in the 1964 campaign actively.

F: What did you do in the campaign?

W: Well, I had the responsibility not only of California, but doing some work in some of the other western states.

F: For instance? How did you do it?

W: Fund raising, primarily. I'm not a politician.

F: Does fund raising consist mainly of the telephone?

W: Oh, no, no. But you had a clear-cut issue in 1964 for the first time. You had two identifiable candidates, and it was not a popularity contest in the political framework. It was a philosophy contest. Back to the famous billboard in Atlantic City that we all saw: "Because you know he's right," I believe the slogan was. One night Larry O'Brien's team inserted, "Yes, far right," or something on the billboard. But I was active in the l964 campaign, and we grew closer together, I guess, starting in early 1964 all the way up to and including that famous June day when he flew back from Glassboro to a dinner party, again, we were having in California. As a matter of fact, he changed, and put on his black tie on *Air Force One*, and got off the plane, and came right to the dinner. I think it was a very exhilarating evening for him, having just come from Glassboro.

F: Did he talk off-the-cuff to you about Glassboro?

W: No, only to say that he was very happy. He didn't have to say it. You could see it in his face.

F: Yes.

W: He was bubbling over with enthusiasm and excitement about the potential that Glassboro offered and the progress that he thought had been made at Glassboro.

F: Did he talk to you about fund raising?

W: Not really.

F: Were you in on the formation of the President's Clubs?

W: Yes.

F: How did that get started? Was it a Johnson idea, or was it Arthur Krim, or what?

W: No, I think it was a Kennedy idea with Arthur Krim, and then I got involved, and a couple other people got involved. And strangely enough, on the West Coast, the President's Club consisted both of Republicans and Democrats. With the passage of time, it's become identified as a Democratic gimmick for fund raising. It was not true at the time. There were many Republicans, who were a bit left of where the Republican Party was heading for and culminated in the nomination and the campaign of Goldwater, who were concerned about the party veering that far to the right, and who wanted a middle-of-the-road party, and [who] felt that the Kennedy group, and then President Johnson, offered the middle of the road.

F: Who hit on the figure of a thousand dollars? It's a nice round number; maybe it's just automatic, I don't know.

W: I think it was almost automatic. A hundred dollars was not enough; ten thousand was too

much; so it was almost an automatic thing. How much are you going to charge for a fund raiser, if you have a dinner party, well, it's a hundred dollars or ten dollars? You very seldom pick out sixty-five dollars, you know.

F: Yes, right.

W: It was almost an automatic figure. It seemed like an easy amount to raise. It worked very well. We had no difficulty whatsoever in raising a great deal of money in those days. The sum paled by comparison with the current fund requirement. We had an interesting thing at that first dinner. It was prior to the availability of several new hotels in Los Angeles, and we were more or less committed to the old Ambassador Hotel that has the famous Coconut Grove.

F: Yes, I know about that.

W: That room was not available, and the only other room had been booked for a Jewish bar mitzvah. So I called the father--the name escapes me for the moment--and told him I needed the room and I would pay him to move the bar mitzvah to an adjoining room which was smaller. He said, "Well, why do you need the room?" And I told him for a party for the President, and he said, "Oh, if you can let my son meet the President, I'll give you the room." I said, "No problem." He said, "Can I meet him?" I said, "No problem." He finally called back, and he said, "Well, if you let the rabbi meet him, it's a deal." So we made the deal. And when the President arrived and went up to the suite, I told him about it, and he laughed, of course, and he said, "Fine."

And [there were] the usual things for security. Incidentally, to the best of my knowledge, this story's never been told. I don't know why. Security had cleared leaving

the main dining room through the kitchen; and it stationed Secret Service men. This was shortly after the Kennedy tragedy, shortly after the Dallas situation, so that everyone was on edge. I'm certain, for that period of time, everything was doubly secured.

We got ready to leave. Mr. [Rufus] Youngblood came over to me and said, "Where's that kid that the President has to meet and have his picture taken with?" And I said, "He's out in the lobby. I'll go get him." And he said, "You don't have to go get him. We're going out that way." I looked at him, and I said, "Well, we spent three hours clearing the back!" He said, "That was just for show." And we went out through the lobby.

There were thousands of people! I was rather puzzled about it. The boy came with the rabbi and the father, and they were photographed, and everything was fine. Going back to the suite and riding out to the airport, I asked Mr. Youngblood why. He said, "Don't you realize that the greatest protection you have is a crowd if they don't know you're coming?"

That's the room where the Bobby Kennedy victory rally was held, and the kitchen exit is the exit that Bobby Kennedy was killed in.

F: That's very interesting.

W: Strange set of circumstances.

F: A real coincidence.

W: And that was early 1964.

F: Did Johnson do any sort of regular check with you, or did he leave that pretty much up to Arthur to handle, on how funds were coming?

W: Oh, he never checked about funds. Arthur handled all of that. I never discussed funds with the President.

F: Did the President ask you, in effect, for your assay on California?

W: Yes, we had an interesting story on that in 1964. We had a very hot issue on the ballot called Proposition 14 which had to do with the black problem.

F: I remember.

W: Integration, if you remember.

F: On housing.

W: Housing. I came back to Washington for a meeting, and I can't recall whether the meeting was at the White House or Camp David. It was one or the other. We came back for a long weekend during which I was to join this meeting. I remember arriving at the meeting, and it was already in progress. Someone was making a speech pointing out that the President was going to lose California. I walked in at that moment, and he turned to me and said, "What is this Proposition 14?" I said, "It's a very emotional issue. It's unconstitutional, according to the advice we've all had." And he said, "What's going to happen with it?" And I said, "I think it'll carry by two million votes." At which point, someone jumped up and said, "See, you're doomed--your whole thing." And he finally turned to me and said, "Lew, what do you think will happen to me in California?" And I said, "I think you'll carry by 750,000 votes."

At which point, someone else got up and allowed how that was ludicrous, [that] there was no way the President who was the champion of civil rights and the whole issue, [that] it was doomed, and [that] if Proposition 14 was going to carry by two million votes,

they were going to lose California and the overflow would hit Arizona and Oregon. We were just doomed.

So I listened to this rap patiently for about five minutes, and then stood up, which, as you know, one does not do in the company of the President, and started to leave. He said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going back to California." He said, "What do you mean, you're going back to California? I thought we were going to have dinner, and you're staying for the weekend." And I said, "Well, I don't want to stay here." And he said, "Why not?" And I said, "Well, you're getting me confused. I'm a very simple man." He said, "What's the matter?" I said, "Well, you know, I live in California. I have the responsibility of some of your activity there. The only place I've heard you identified with Proposition 14 is in this room. Before you get me confused and get me thinking along those lines, I'm going to get out of here." He laughed.

It was quite true which points out the difficulty of being isolated. The final result was that Proposition 14 carried by two million, seven or eight hundred thousand, and the President carried by over a million.

F: The people never associated the two?

W: Never identified. They were anti-Goldwater. There was just no way Goldwater could carry California. I was concerned--the "big lie" technique--if we kept talking about Proposition 14 identified with President Johnson, somebody would start to believe it, you know? I literally had never heard it until I arrived at that meeting, or heard it since.

F: Did you have an opportunity to observe the relationship between Johnson and Pat Brown?

W: Yes, yes. We flew down with Pat one time. I think the President was having a barbecue for the President of Mexico, as I recall.

F: By down, you mean to the Ranch?

W: The Ranch. And we flew down in the official plane of the state of California--twenty-five or thirty of us. This was early. I'd say they were friendly, politically friendly.

F: They didn't sort of have a natural affinity for each other.

W: Well, I don't think they were buddy-buddy, you know. They were friends.

F: Did you ever really think that Johnson might name Brown as his vice presidential running mate?

W: No.

F: You never got any indications that way?

W: No, no. I never had that [impression].

F: Do you think Brown thought so?

W: Yes. I think every potential candidate--

F: Expects to be vice president. (Laughter)

W: --expects to be president or vice president.

F: Right.

W: I'm reminded of a dinner I had a couple months ago just prior to the telethon. Virtually everyone who was at the telethon came to the house for a social evening, and there were about fifty people, including about eight or ten locals, because we couldn't handle any more. One woman said to me, "You think anyone here thinks he's going to be president or vice president?" And I said, "Everyone here thinks he's going to be president."

(Laughter)

Including your senator.

F: Yes.

W: Lloyd Bentsen.

F: Right, right.

W: Ironically enough, I'd never spent any time with George McGovern until that evening, because he was not a favorite of mine, still isn't. And he's a charming man when he isn't running for political office. (Laughter).

F: That's one of the things I'm sorry I've missed in history, and that was the first five minutes that McGovern and Johnson spent together when McGovern came through here to get his support.

W: I imagine it could have been quite interesting.

F: I think it could have been quite. Did you ever consider taking any post with the government?

W: No. No. As a matter of fact, in, I think it was, December of 1963, Ed Weisl and I went up to the Hotel Carlyle to visit the President. It was after Dallas, and we sat around for a few hours.

F: That's in New York.

W: That's in New York. At the end of the discussion, I turned to him and said, "I'd like to ask you a very important favor." I had the feeling the President bristled at the remark and said, "Yes, Lew, what is it?" And I said, "I want you to promise me that I never have to work for the government." He laughed, and he promised it to me; and that was the end of

it. I also, subsequent to that, made the request not to be on any commissions or anything.

F: Did you ever have to say no?

W: I never got the opportunity to say no, because I got a call one day from Roger Stevens. I was never involved, fortunately. I got a call one day from Roger Stevens telling me that he was appointing me to the executive committee of the Kennedy Center. And I said, "Roger, I think you're confused. I'm not a director of the Kennedy Center"--although President Kennedy had asked me to serve back in early 1961 or l962--"so that I don't quite know what you're talking about." He said, "Lew, you may not think you're a trustee of the Kennedy Center, but let me read you something from the *Washington Post*." Then he said that President Johnson had named Lew Wasserman, and so forth and so forth, to a ten or twelve-year term, or whatever it is. And I said, "Well, it must be one of those squibs," and he said, "It's not a squib; it's an official White House release." I said," Well, it's a mistake."

F: He never asked you?

W: So I called the White House. I forget then whether it was Jimmy Jones or Larry Temple that was there at the time. And I said, "What is this about my being on Kennedy Center?" He said, "You've been appointed." I said, "Well, it's the first I've heard of it." And they said, "Well, what do you want us to do about it?" I said, "Well, I want you to change it." He said, "You don't seem to understand, Lew. The press story's already been given out. I'd be very happy to let you talk to the President. He's in a very foul mood anyhow." (Laughter). So I said, no, I'd wait.

I was down at the Ranch and said something to him. He just looked at me and

said, "You can make a contribution because it's culture, entertainment, and so forth." And that was the end of it. I was on the Kennedy Center and still am. (Laughter)

F: He never asked you. He just let you know.

W: No. He certainly did not.

F: What did you do on the Kennedy Center? What are you doing? What have you done?

W: Well, very little, as a matter of fact. Since 1968, I haven't been in Washington very much. I've gone to two or three of the Kennedy Center meetings, tried to make a contribution, but I'm involved in California in the Music Center and other civic community activity. One just runs out of time, you know.

F: Did the President ever talk to you about either the National Endowment for the Humanities, or for the Arts? What he dreamed of in that way?

W: Yes, yes. He discussed it at great length and was very anxious to have our nation meet at least the levels that other nations were already at.

F: Did you feel this was an understanding commitment, or was it just good politics?

W: I think it was understanding commitment. I think he believed that the nation should have more activity in this area, that it was a function of government to do so. I'm happy to say that the present Administration evidently feels the same way and is doing something about it; not enough, but they are doing something about it.

F: Well, now, a lot is said, and not without some justification, about Johnson's sometimes parochialism and boorishness and so forth. Did you observe that?

W: Well, he was certainly parochial in the sense that we're using the word. He was never boorish. I was always very impressed by the fact that, holding the highest office in the

world, he was a real person, at least with people who he considered his friends. He certainly did not put on airs or acts, or throw his clout or image about. I'm reminded of the time we were back in Washington at a private dinner about the time Luci and Pat were married, and there was an American Airlines strike. There were about ten of us at dinner, and my wife was seated on the President's right. She was complaining to him about the difficulty we were having trying to get back to California because of the strike, and he picked up the phone which was on the dining room table to call Warren Woodward. And she said to him, "Well, don't bother with that. Lew's already talked to Woody, and there's nothing he can do." At which point, the President howled, because he was the president of the United States who certainly had more influence than her husband. He roared with it, and we finally--

F: Lyndon Johnson might be able to do a little bit more than Lew Wasserman!

W: Yes. It never dawned on her, you know, that she was talking to the President of the United States. Which only proves his real quality as a friend; because she was totally at ease.

F: The White House, I think, gave you some feeling of the presidency. I myself always had trouble at the Ranch remembering where I was. You must have run into that.

W: Yes, and at Camp David. It was very informal, and you had the feeling you were with family, you know.

F: Yes.

W: But I must say, when you dined upstairs and spent some time after dinner with Lady Bird and Lyndon, you . . . I have yet to enter the White House where I don't tear up. So I'm

the wrong fellow to talk to. To me, it's the White House and always will be.

We had the privilege of giving a painting to the White House many years ago and, unlike other people who wanted their name on it and so forth, we didn't identify it. It's a scene in Boston Harbor. It's in the Yellow Sitting Room on the second floor. And he always teased me about not having my name on it.

F: You gave it during the Johnson Administration.

W: Yes. It could have been the tail end of the Kennedy. It was during that whole period. I considered [that] I was indeed fortunate to be able to refer to him as a friend.

I'm reminded of the time that--I happen to be a telephone nut, I have telephones everywhere, my car--I was driving home one day from the studio. I was preoccupied. It was about this time of the year, and *Time* came out with its Christmas issue; and the President was the Man of the Year on the cover. I drove in on my motor court, and my wife was standing there shouting at the top of her voice, waving her hands, saying, "Why don't you have your car telephone on? The President's calling." And I said, "The President's in Texas for the holidays. He can't be calling." Because she said, "The White House is calling." And I said, "I've only been gone twenty minutes, you know."

I went in and called the White House. Even I'd forgotten that wherever the President is, they announce the White House is calling. They funnel the calls through the White House. It was the President to tease me about the fact that there was a story on the inside of *Time* that was rather complimentary to me, about my capability and everything. He said I was stealing his thunder: here he was on the cover and there was a two-page story on the inside. And that was a call from a friend; that was not a call from the

President of the United States.

But he could be firm. During the Glassboro dinner, I remember getting a call from my home that there was a Signal Corps officer there in uniform to install a telephone. So I said that had to be a mistake. I hadn't ordered any telephone. I certainly didn't do any business with the Signal Corps. I said, "Put the man on the phone." They did. I said, "I don't know who you are or what you're doing in my home, but I didn't order a phone." He said, "Well, the President has ordered the phone put in your room, and I understand I'm standing in your room. Now, would you like it at the head of your bed or at the foot of your bed?" I said, "I really wouldn't like it at all." He said, "Well, we're going to install it, so you may as well put it where you like it."

They installed the white phone for the period of three or four weeks while the whole activity of the dinner was going on. It was actually a replacement dinner for a dinner that had been sold out of when the President took ill that had to be cancelled, and this was a make-up dinner. We had visions of telling fifteen hundred people the second dinner was going to be cancelled. At which time, I'd have probably been run out of town on a rail.

F: Yes.

W: But it worked out all right.

F: Why would he put one in your home?

W: So he could talk to me, I guess, if he wanted to discuss something about dinner, and do it immediately. You know, when he wanted something, he wanted it; and if he wanted to talk to you, he wanted to talk to you right then.

F: What did you do when you went to the Ranch?

W: I must say, all the visits we've had at the Ranch have been entirely personal. We visited friends. We went driving in the countryside; had a barbecue; sat around and looked at some movies; had dinner.

F: Are you talking about commercial movies, or are you talking about travels?

W: No, mostly travel movies, or--

F: Johnson days?

W: Johnson days; commercial movies; all types of movies, depending on the occasion.

F: Out in the hangar?

W: Out in the hangar.

F: Did he ever ask your advice when he started that round of movies depicting each month in the White House, or as to how it should be put together?

W: Generally, he would say he was doing it.

F: Did he use you technically?

W: No. No. He did not.

F: Did he ever talk to you about his image?

W: On occasion. Not in any great depth. I don't think until the middle of 1968, as a matter of fact. We, in California, had already cranked up the beginnings of the campaign. Or until the latter part of 1967, I don't think.

F: He made his announcement on March 31, 1968, that he was not going to be a candidate.

W: Yes, we had already had one or two meetings in California with a group, fund raising organization meetings.

F: Well, now, California's about as fractious a state as Texas politically.

W: It certainly is.

F: Or as senseless a state, if you want to put it that way. It won't stand a hitch. Did you have the feeling in 1968 that you could pull it off?

W: Yes. In my humble opinion, the President would have carried California in 1968, particularly against Richard Nixon, because, back in 1962 in the Brown campaign, we defeated President Nixon by almost three hundred thousand votes.

F: He didn't do too much to enhance his image at the end of the campaign, either.

W: No, he did not.

As a matter of fact, Senator Humphrey came close to pulling it off in 1968. Another interesting point I believe is that people identified the debacle of 1968 with what happened in Chicago due to the violence on television. I personally do not believe that the violence on television hurt the 1968 campaign. What it did do, in irreparably damaging the campaign, was it shut off all funds for the campaign for about seven weeks, and it was very divisive with the so-called liberal wing of the party. By the time they came back in, which they did prior to the election, and by the time funds were raised to the degree that they were raised, it was too late to use them effectively. It's my personal belief that, to this day, if Senator Humphrey had been on NBC television the night before the election instead of ABC--ABC being the least expensive of the networks, which is the only reason Senator Humphrey bought it--it could have made a difference in the election.

F: Did Johnson ever talk to you about 1968 campaign?

W: No. He did not, except to say that he was happy to see me supporting Hubert, because

I'd, in my own small area of operation, made an announcement that I was also retiring in 1968 after the March date. And I came back in for a while with Senator Humphrey.

F: Did you get the feeling that his affection for Humphrey was genuine?

W: Yes. I'm convinced it was.

F: Did he ever talk to you about the problems of distance among students and blacks and so forth, the types of people that, in a sense, he had tried to help and, in one way, turned on him? Do you think he understood the reasons?

W: Yes. I believe he understood that the reason was Vietnam. I also believe that he felt that if there was a way to communicate the real issues in Vietnam, that the reasons would be answered or understood. But there was just no way to communicate.

I don't believe that anyone realized the depth of the feeling for Vietnam. I tried to point out on a few occasions that we that deal with the public and the mass media, mainly in television, have found that there is a thing called the fatigue factor that sets in. A given program can be on television very successfully up to a given point and then, for some unexplicable reason, it starts to disintegrate; and research has indicated that it's called the fatigue factor. That, I believe, is the one thing that the Administration failed to understand about the Vietnam War. We checked and, I believe, in the California area there was actually on television in every twenty-four hour period over an hour of war film, seven days a week.

F: Somewhere, I get absorbed.

W: That's the sum total of three minutes on this newscast starting at seven in the morning, and five minutes here in a special news story; and I think the over-absorption . . . As

ridiculous as it may sound, had it been possible to change the name of the war and the color of the uniforms of the enemy, it could have gone on longer. There was a total turnoff, as it were, with the mass population.

F: It's watching "Gunsmoke" every night, in effect. So that, even though it's a popular program--

W: For ten years.

F: Yes.

W: That's a lot of "Gunsmoke."

F: After awhile, I just don't care any more.

W: You could have mentioned one of our programs.

F: Yes, I could have. Take an obvious one. Did Johnson talk to you about what I suppose you'd call, his PR problems?

W: Yes, generally. He asked for opinions, for temperature readings about how to cope with the PR problems, as distinguished from whether he had one. I think the President was aware he had a PR problem, certainly in the latter days of the Administration.

F: Well, now, you saw him under a variety of circumstances from the formal, set speech to just sitting out there at the Ranch, and you know he's a fascinating talker.

W: Yes.

F: Why did he miss?

W: Well, I believe he missed, just as many people miss, because of the psychological problem of being on camera. I believe the President was enormously effective in small groups, small groups being anything under a hundred, where you could really

communicate.

F: Where he could, in a sense--

W: Talk to *you*.

F: Yes, look at you.

W: And you believed he was looking at you. There are many people--as we've learned, I, having spent my entire adult life in the image business, as it were, having to do with personalities that hit or miss--the most talented actors or actresses are not necessarily the most popular, and the most capable performers, in a great many cases, are unemployed. This has to do with their failure to transmit or to communicate. On the other hand, there are certain personalities that never read a script until five minutes before they're going to play a very emotional scene and, because of the strength of their personality, that terrible word charisma, have the capability of going on camera and playing a very difficult scene as though they had rehearsed it for two weeks. It's the mystery of what the public will or will not accept.

And again, history has taught us. Whatever history exists in the cinema which goes back about sixty years, we've run the gamut from the pretty boy, back in the silent days of John Gilbert and Gilbert Roland and Rod LaRock and very attractive, continental types, to the strong, he-man, American types, the Clark Gables and Spencer Tracys *et cetera*, to the glamorous American types, Gary Cooper, Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart, to the all-American boy, the Henry Fonda type, through the mod type, the Marlon Brandos and Steve McQueens, the unattractive males. And at the moment I personally think we're on the trend of the attractive male. I would guess that Robert Redford will be the next

superstar in Hollywood. He's virtually there now. Paul Newman was there ahead of him. So we've come full circle, and who is to say that the next type will not again be the continental, Jack Gilbert-Gilbert Roland type?

F: Ronald Coleman.

W: Ronald Coleman. You know, Ronald Coleman back in the late twenties was earning five thousand dollars a week.

I think this is happening on television with people. In the television framework, the Johnson personality is going to be a huge star at a given point. The timing was off. In 1976 or 1980 or 1984, whatever the period is, the parochial-personalized approach, simple-fireside-chat concept that FDR started, in my opinion, can be very effective.

I happen to think it would be very effective today, if the proper individual was available.

F: Yes. You think they're ready?

W: Yes, I think we've come full circle. I think we're ready.

F: Did he ever consider a sort of a Robert Montgomery-Svengali type, such as Eisenhower had?

W: No, it was impossible. If you knew the President at all, you knew that would be impossible.

F: I think he would have frozen on anyone like that.

W: Well, I think it would have been as artificial as many of his television appearances were in that it would have not been the President.

F: Right. What sort of White House functions did you go to?

W: Well, the one we're the proudest of is the function he had for all of his friends from Texas. We were staying at the White House that weekend. He had a huge party for a couple thousand people from Texas, huge receiving line.

F: It was about the spring of 1968, late spring or early summer? I guess the summer.

W: Yes. Someplace in there. I thought it was closer to fall, but you're probably right. We joined the receiving line, and when the Naval aide asked us who we were, we said, "Mr. and Mrs. Lew Wasserman from Johnson City, Texas."

F: I see, the old, original Texans.

W: The original Texans. Anyway, we went to the usual state dinner. We were fortunate in spending some weekends there.

F: What sort of state dinners?

W: I don't remember who they were for anymore.

F: Anything else?

(Some new voices enter into conversation from this point on; Mrs. Edie Wasserman, Mrs. Lyndon Johnson)

EW: One was the Harold Wilson?

W: Went to the wedding, Lynda's wedding, of course.

EW: Went to farewell to the Chief of Protocol.

W: Oh, yes. George Ball.

EW: No, no.

F: Lloyd Hand.

W: No, no, the one ahead of him.

(Several voices at once, all saying): Angier Biddle Duke.

F: It's all right. We'll get him in a minute.

W: There was one for Angie and then there was a businessman's conference, and then there was the wedding, and then there was . . .

EW: There was a private dinner upstairs.

W: Yes, there were--

F: Were you ever called upon to sort of direct any staging?

W: No.

F: Always a friend.

W: For the very simple reason, I'm not capable.

F: No, but you've got some resources.

W: Yes, yes. We made some resources available. I can give you an anecdote about resources if you want one.

F: Yes.

W: In the l964 campaign, when the President was coming in to Los Angeles making an appearance on the City Hall steps, I received a call in the afternoon the preceding day from the security men telling me he had a problem. And I said, "What's your problem?" And he said, "Well, you know, President and Mrs. Johnson and Governor and Mrs. Brown are coming in this motorcade from Long Beach and arriving at City Hall. They want a facility in which to clean up and freshen up." And I said, "Well, have them go in the City Hall. Very simple." He said, "Well, you know how the President is. Schedules run tight and . . ."

F: And behind.

W: . . . and behind." And I said, "Well, why are you calling me?" He said, "I don't know. I talked to Jack Valenti, and he said if we had any problems to call you and you'd take care of them." I said, "All right. Give me your phone number, and I'll call you back." And he said, "Well, you can't call me back." I said, "Why not?" He said, "Well, I don't have a phone." I said, "Where are you now?" He said, "I'm on the lawn of the City Hall with a portable telephone." I said, "Well, call me back in an hour."

I rang back to the production officer and said, "Do we have a new dressing room?" And he said, "We have one we're finishing." And I think it was for Doris Day or Cary Grant, one or the other. I said, "Where is it?" He said, "It's back in the paint shop." So I said, "Okay, I'll be back to see it." And never having been back to the paint shop before, I got in the car and went back to the paint shop. We had this beautiful what we now call huge mobile homes which we use on the premises for stars, with washroom facilities, sitting rooms, *et cetera*. So I said to this man, "What do you need to connect this?" And he said, "A four or six-inch sewer pipe and a hundred feet of electric cord. We carry everything else." I said," Well, get it ready, and I'll have it picked up in an hour." And I left. By the time I left, the heads of production had arrived. It was quite an event for me to be in that particular department.

I went back to my office, and the phone rang, and it was the security man. And I said, "Get ready." And this man came storming in, the head of the department, said, "You don't understand, Mr. Wasserman. We can't take this off the premises. It's too wide; it's too heavy; we haven't got a license, because it's only used on the premises."

The premises are about four hundred acres. And I said, "Don't worry about it. How heavy is it?" I said, "What do you need to pull it?" He said, "But you can't take it out, you can't go out on the streets with it."

Well, this chap called me back. And I said, "Have a couple of security men here, and we'll give you the rig to take it down, but I want you to know it's against the law. It's too wide and the freeway . . ." He said, "Don't worry about that." I couldn't tell this department head what it was going to be used for for security reasons.

So the next day I decided to go down and see what was going on. And, sure enough, this motorcade arrived with President and Mrs. Johnson and Governor and Mrs. Brown. There must have been a quarter of a million people in the area; and they got out and went into this trailer, and everything was fine. The President got up and made a speech. And when it was over, I went up and said hello, and he turned to me and said, "I understand you arranged all this." And I said, "Well, I helped a bit." He turned to Jack Valenti and said, "I want one of these at every stop." (Laughter)

F: I hope he didn't give you that assignment.

W: No, I didn't get that assignment.

EW: I think Lew ran at that point. (Laughter)

F: Right. Was the President star-struck at all, or did he even know who entertainment people were?

W: Yes, I would say--well, star-struck may be a bit strong. I would say he had a curiosity about Hollywood. On many mornings when I'd be down, I don't know whether you know his form at the White House, if you were a guest and a friend. I'm not talking about state

guests now. When you were awake in the morning, if you asked for your coffee, if the President wanted to see you, he would ask you to come down and have your coffee with him in his bedroom in your robe and slippers, which I did on many occasions. We would chat.

And I'm reminded of the time we were sitting around after dinner upstairs one night, talking about Hollywood and about movie stars and personalities; I kept asking to go to bed because I thought he looked tired. It got to be rather late; it got to be one or two in the morning. He finally went to bed. Mrs. Johnson said, "Why don't we have a nightcap?" And I said, "Fine." And I said, "You know, we really feel quite guilty about coming to the White House." And she said, "What do you mean?" And I said, "Well, you know, I have the feeling that if we hadn't been here the President would have gone to bed at eleven o'clock instead of one. Instead of which, we sat and talked." And she looked at me and said, "Lew, don't you realize this is the only relaxation he gets?" You know, this had nothing to do with politics, and we were just shooting the breeze, as it were, about movie-making or television programs or about the people in them or what they did. So to that degree I think he was curious about a lot of things, you know.

F: Was he interested in the technicalities of the movie-making?

W: Yes.

F: Of TV?

W: Yes, yes.

F: Did he have any particular grasp of it?

W: I think he had an awareness of the time, the effort, the money that went into it, the risks

involved. He couldn't quite figure out how it became a business, how the return was generated.

F: Did he ever talk to you about his own experience as a local TV executive?

W: I was not under the impression he was a local TV executive. I thought Lady Bird was the executive.

F: Yes.

EW: Lady Bird's the local TV executive.

F: Somewhere in there he said to me, "I keep an eye on her."

LJ: (Laughter)

W: Well, as I recall it, he said to me, "I hope Lady Bird isn't paying you too much for your programs," I believe was the quote. He didn't say anything about his keeping an eye on anything.

F: Did you have any inkling at all of the March 31 speech?

W: None.

F: Where were you?

W: I was in California, just having had a meeting of the committee to begin a campaign.

F: What did you do? Dismantle it in a hurry? Or did you get any word out of the White House? Or was that your cue from TV?

W: No, I believe that we got a call to be sure and watch TV, and that was really the first word that we had with it.

F: Do you have any idea who called you?

W: No.

F: And you watched?

W: We sure did.

F: What did you do when the program was over?

W: Called everyone and told them that not only the President had retired, but I'd retired. (Laughter) He retired for the both of us.

F: So you were through as a manager.

W: I was through as a manager. I did become involved late in the 1968 campaign at the national scene at the last minute. But I was through as a manager, and I've stayed through, incidentally.

F: Were you involved in that Astrodome performance that John Connally, Ralph Yarborough, Johnson, Humphrey right at the tail end of the campaign which was kind of a great big unity affair? Evidently not or you would remember.

W: No. Actually my role in the 1968 campaign was purely that of a contributor and running one dinner for Senator Humphrey.

EW: Which I ran.

W: I was sick in bed.

F: Well, that's the way to do it, that's good management, yes.

W: That's the way to do it.

F: Well, I think I'm about at an end.

W: Well, good. (Laughter) We can go on with Lady Bird.

F: Right.

LJ: I didn't mean to precipitate it.

F: No.

LJ: Well, I just wanted to let you know that I think I've finished my little chores.

W: We're ready to go. Are we going by Luci's?

LJ: Let me call her. Let me ask you first: Are you too tired?

W: Will you drive us to the plane?

(Inaudible question)

W: We came to the dedication. We came over to Austin because Ben Barnes had a brunch; it was a breakfast or something. And we had the plane. We landed at the Ranch in a DC-9, and we flew over to Austin to attend this thing because he thought we should. He didn't. We were going to go back to the Ranch with the entire group. There were about thirty people here that had come to the dedication from California. Then the weather changed, and the pilot was troubled about going in to the Ranch with a full load as it were, and we didn't go back on that trip. We went right back to California.

EW: He arrived at our bungalow.

W: Late the next morning.

EW: Seemed early to me.

W: To drive us to the plane at the Ranch. We thought he'd sleep for two days. I was exhausted.

EW: He drove us.

W: Absolutely exhausted.

EW: He didn't look exhausted. We did. (Laughter)

W: I certainly didn't want to be going to Austin to Ben Barnes' to drink bloody marys at eight

o'clock in the morning.

EW: He wanted us to.

W: Ben had invited the entire California contingent and the President thought it would be rude on my part if I didn't come over. So we came over.

F: Did he suggest Valenti to you, or did you pick out Valenti on your own?

W: Well, off the record, is your tape off?

F: I'm on. Do you want to take it off?

W: Well, no, I don't mind being on. I just won't use any names. Actually, the President suggested another individual who was working for him that he was anxious to retain and that didn't work out. The other individual had no interest in it. He was politically ambitious, and then went on and attempted a career politically, and it didn't work. That kind of started the chain of thought. And we asked him, Krim [Arthur B.] and I did, and Ed Weisl; three of us, "What about Valenti?" He was not at all receptive to the idea, because I believe he was troubled by whether Jack could cut it, or whether it was viable for Jack. Because, at that time, the art industry had gone quite far in another direction. And we told him we thought it was viable. At which point, he gave us his blessing, and then we went and put it together and came back and talked to Jack, and he gave Jack his blessing.

EW: Jack had come out of an advertising career.

F: Yes.

W: Jack had come out of a different area.

But he had really discussed another individual with us.

F: I always liked Jack until that point, and then I got jealous of him because I saw a picture of him with Joanne Woodward.

EW: (Laughter)

F: I wrote Jack and told him it annoyed me.

EW: We'll get you a picture with somebody else if you come to California.

W: We saw Jack the other evening; he's a close friend.

EW: As a matter of fact, we'll take a picture of him. We'll take him over to your friend who is shooting tomorrow. Who's in the Redford picture?

W: I don't know who the female is, dear. Now that I've become a pencil-pusher, I don't know what the pictures are we're making. I only see them when they're through.

F: That's right. Redford's down here in San Marcos.

EW: Yes! That's our picture.

W: Yes, on a film being directed by a chap named George Roy Hill, who made "Butch Cassidy" and a picture called "The Sting" that opens here on the 25th with Redford and Paul Newman.

F: Yes.

W: According to the film.

EW: Joanne Woodward's husband, that is.

W: Paul Newman's an old friend of ours out of Cleveland, Ohio. He used to sit around our house. He's the only man I've ever known to drink a case of beer.

EW: A case of beer.

F: All by himself?

W: All by himself.

EW: Those little ones, you know, the Coors.

F: I could do that, but I'd weigh two hundred pounds when it's over.

EW: Well, he did for a while.

W: An entire case of beer.

F: Well, I suppose that's talent.

W: That's talent in a way. (Laughter).

F: Did you ever fly *Air Force One*?

EW: Oh, yes!

W: Yes. And the chopper.

F: Was it an active flight, or did you just pretty well sit there, and the President taking work, or what?

W: Well, any time you're around the President, as I recall, it was very active. Be it on the plane, be it at Camp David, be it at the Ranch. We were down one weekend. Harry was just showing us some of the film of it. Henry Ford and his wife were down, and it was just at the time when they had come out with the new Mark IV automobile, 1966, 1967, 1968, whenever it was. And the President said, "Let's go for a ride." At which point, Henry Ford and Lew Wasserman wound up in the jump seat in the back, and the President was in the front, Mrs. Ford, Edie and a few other girls, and he took off across the country. As you know, the President drove at a good rate of speed.

F: I always felt that I wouldn't want to buy a used car from that man! (Laughter)

EW: That's how Henry felt. (Laughter).

W: And he usually managed to drive where there were no roads. After about fifteen minutes of this, Henry Ford looked around at me and said, "You know, Lew, I don't think this car is built for this terrain." (Laughter)

EW: We were going sixty across the flowers.

F: His grandfather's might have been, but not a Mark IV or a Continental.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

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