INTERVIEW I

DATE: November 23, 1968

INTERVIEWEE: BEN J. WATTENBERG

INTERVIEWER: T. HARRI BAKER

PLACE: Mr. Wattenberg's office, Executive Office Building, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 2

B: This is an interview with Ben Wattenberg, speech writer.

Mr. Wattenberg, to start out, would you outline briefly your background, your career, before you came to the White House staff?

W: I've always been in one way or another in journalism--publishing, writing, editing. When I got out of the Air Force--and I was stationed in Texas incidentally--in 1956 I was editor of two trade magazines in Stanford, Connecticut dealing with the inland commercial marine industry--tugboats, barges. Then in 1959 or '60, I guess, I started with a friend of mine a national magazine called Leisure, which was supposed to be sort of a cross between Sports Illustrated and Esquire or something. Anyway, we were greatly underfinanced. This lasted for about almost two years. I was very young at the time, I guess twenty-six, twenty-seven. And when that enterprise sort of collapsed, I went into book publishing with a partner, a guy whom I had known, who financed a small book publishing company which did very well, and which published, curiously, the first juvenile book about John Kennedy called The Boy's Life Of John F. Kennedy, which I thought of and then the guy wrote it and did sort of a crummy job. So I rewrote it and it turned out to be sort of a best seller kind of a thing. After about a year and a half or two years of that--

B: Let me ask you, who's the author of record of that?

W. A guy named Bruce Lee, who was a correspondent for Newsweek at the time. Following that I split up with my partner--we didn't really

get along very well--and started freelancing, both as a publisher doing some consulting work and as an author, as a writer. I had written a couple of books, mostly juvenile books, one called Busy Waterways and one called the Story of Harbors, which were based on my knowledge of the inland marine industry.

Then I had had an idea while I was a publisher that it would be a grand [thing]--this was when the 1960 census was coming out, or actually it was after having read Teddy [Theodore] White's book, The Making of a President, 1960, where he has a long section, I don't know if you recall it, about what the 1960 census would show in relationship to politics. I had the idea it would be a wonderful thing--this was while I was a publisher--if we could get a novelist who might take the census data and attempt to humanize it and might show what personal things the census numbers had to show. My partner in the publishing business at that time thought that was simply a dreadful idea, and we just forgot about it.

Then when I came to be freelancing, I suggested it to my agent who sent me off to Doubleday and they thought it was a grand idea. I came down here to Washington and got to meet Dick [Richard] Scammon who was director of the Bureau [of the Census], 1961-1965 . At Doubleday's suggestion, it was just sort of a co-authorship rather than a single author, although as Dick says, I did all the writing and the expertise in the book was not primarily his. It was that of the Census Bureau, the sociologists, the economists. At any event I wrote this book, and I started, I guess, in late '62 and finished it about eighteen months later.

B: Let me stick a title in the record here. That's This U.S.A. [Ben J.

Wattenberg, in collaboration with Richard M. Scammon. New York: Doubleday, 1965]

W: Right. I finished the manuscript actually in early '64. Dick was then deeply involved in helping out, I gathered--he was Director of the Census Bureau at the time but was immersed I think in the 1964 election campaign, his field being election statistics, election strategy, whatnot. It took him a while to go through the manuscript. He ultimately didn't make very many changes in it.

B: May I again interrupt and ask a question that anyone reading this is liable to ask--deeply immersed on which side, if any?

W: Dick was a member of the administration. He was working in the government at that time and has been a life-long Democrat and is acknowledged to be a Democrat and is an old personal friend of Hubert Humphrey's. But he's a very remarkable man in that while he is an acknowledged Democrat, in his field of election data and election statistics, he is about as nonpartisan--I mean he calls them as he sees them, sometimes to the dismay of the Democrats, and makes all his files and views and data available to the Republicans as well, and has worked with the Republicans. But he's constitutionally a Democrat.

In any event the book kind of got delayed a little bit because of this, but ultimately was published in the fall of 1965. Scammon and I appeared on the Today Show with Hugh Downs, and the book got very widely reviewed and began to sell rather well, and almost without exception favorably reviewed except in one or two instances. It made the lead section in Time Magazine--the number one article. Hugh Sidey [Time and Life Magazines] called me and did a

piece using it as sort of a springboard. Curiously, it's an interesting article, reading back on it now, where he said the book, "This U.S.A., takes the census data and attempts to popularize them and interpret them. It comes out essentially as a pretty optimistic book, certainly when compared to a lot of the rhetoric that one hears these days about slums and poverty and race and all the other capital letter dilemmas about America." Hugh Sidey did this as a lead piece in Time magazine--that would be probably in October of 1965, as I recall it, just before the book came out--where he said it here at the White House. He said, "A staff aide told President Johnson here the other day that despite all of these wonderful programs that he was putting through, nobody chose to believe--" The point that Time Magazine made was that nobody in America chose to believe all these crises that Johnson was talking about, about poverty and about race and about pollution, and about everything else; that the general feeling, as this new book showed, was that by any historical comparative sort of way you wanted to look at it, things--you'll excuse the expression--had never been better, and that this was why some of the programs were getting in difficulty, mounting this kind of a public acceptance. You know, compared, for example, to the New Deal times when I'm sure any little program had a great public impact because there was such a great need for these programs, and such an obvious and public need for it.

In any event, it was curious the way the article was written. It almost seemed as if it were an anti-Johnson book, because here Hugh was saying how difficult things were and how we have to get this program through and this program through; and this book was

essentially saying things were in relatively good shape. Although it stressed again and again that there were major social problems in America, just comparatively. Compared to what and compared to when, things were pretty good, but there were certainly great holes in our social fabric that needed action.

In any event, I then went about my business and signed a contract with Doubleday to do another book which when I leave here, I will be going back to, which was to take the United Nations' statistical data--the demographic yearbook and the statistical yearbook--and do some world traveling and write a similar sort of a book--this one on my own without Scammon--about what that data showed. I spent the spring of '66 traveling in Europe to UNESCO and World Health Organization and at the U.N. in New York, preparing this book; and was prepared that fall of '66 to take another trip to Asia and whatnot. Where was I going to go? India, Africa, Asia.

I was working in my office one day I guess in late-July when I got a call from Hayes Redmon.

B: This was late July of '66.

W: Late July of '66. I got a call from Hayes Redmon, who was at that time Bill Moyer's righthand man, worked very closely with Bill; and said that they had read my book, and they had spoken to Scammon about me. Would I be interested in coming down for a few months, in any event, to start to work writing speeches for the President during this 1966 campaign.

Well, I said, you know, "Give me about ten seconds to think about it," and said I'd be down. Actually, he asked me could I come down and have lunch with Bill Moyers about it. This was in late-July. As

it turned out--I have never really checked this out for sure--I think what brought me to their minds was the President had made a speech in Indianapolis. I would put the date somewhere in mid-July. It was basically, he had been talking early that year almost exclusively about Vietnam this and Vietnam that, and this speech--I think Bill Moyers wrote it--dealt not with Vietnam but with America today, cribbed extensively from This U.S.A. in terms of thought and content. The speech ended up saying that "as one observer has noted recently," quotes, and the last two paragraphs of the speech were, I think as I recall it, the last two paragraphs of my book. Apparently he got a terrific response on the speech, so Moyers told me or so I heard that people said, "Boy, it was a pleasure to hear you not talk about Vietnam," and everything else. In any event, they were at this time tooling up for what was planned to be--planned is a difficult word around here, as you know, but there was thinking toward that he was going to go out for ten consecutive weekends and make ten speeches each weekend.

B: He, the President?

W: He, the President, right, during the last ten or so weeks of the campaign and try to bring in the 89th Congress again so that the 90th Congress would be as good for him as the 89th Congress was, and really go out and take the case to the people. So Hayes asked me to come down here for lunch with Bill. That would have been early August, I guess.

B: May I ask, at this stage had you had any prior direct political experience?

W: Only as very much a grassroots amateur in Stanford, Connecticut. I had worked for the Democratic Party. I had run for office, both

for party office for the town and city committee in Stanford, and for city office as a representative. You know, Johnson has this habit of asking people whenever they offer political judgments, "Well, how many elections have you won?" My answer would be, like most of the people around here, "None, but at least I ran for office twice, and I lost twice." But it was a very interesting. I had actually gone door-to-door in a district of 5,000 people, shaking hands, introducing yourself, you know, just like a politician.

B: Like other noted authors. Gore Vidal, for example--losing campaign.

W: That's right. He lost also, and [James A.] Michener lost. He ran in Connecticut. I can't think of anybody who won. I guess Roy Neuburger was an author or a magazine writer, say, a professional.

B: I interrupted you. You were at the luncheon with Hayes Redmon.

W: Yes. I came down here, nervous as hell--I guess I stayed over Tuesday night--and on Wednesday came here to this E.O.B. [Executive Office Building] to meet Hayes Redmon.

B: What were you nervous about?

W: Well, you know, I had been I guess in the White House once before in my life, or twice before, when I was a publisher. I had come down and seen Pierre Salinger on something and seen Mike [Myer] Feldman, I think, and I was nervous then. You know, the idea of getting a call from the White House itself was a devastating experience. I think people here--you tend to forget it after awhile, just what it means getting--I remember the call came in and the White House operator saying, "Mr. Wattenberg, the White House calling," you know--whoosh, up goes the balloon! Anyway--and I knew I was going to meet Moyers who at that time--I had never met

him, never spoke to him. I knew some people who knew him, Scammon knew him, some other people knew him, but I had never met him. And he was at that time--the code word that he went by was the second most powerful man in the United States, Johnson being the first. Whether this was true or not, I don't know--I'm sure that there was a time it probably was true. So I was just nervous about the idea of meeting Moyers.

I came in here about 1 o'clock and I met Hayes Redmon and he took me across the street to the West Wing. We waited a while until Moyers got finished with something, and I met Bill. He was a very nice, charming guy, and immediately called me by my first name and I called him by his first name. We went down to the White House Mess and had lunch. I told him something of my background just as I'm telling it to you now, that sort of thing, what I was interested in and what I wasn't interested in. First, I guess Walt Rostow stopped by, and he was, of course at the time, and still is very well known. Moyers introduced him to me. He said, oh, gee, he had just finished reading my book, and his wife was teaching from my book, as a matter of fact, up at the American University. So I was just very thrilled about that. Then the Vice President walked by, and Bill introduced me to the Vice President. He said, "By God, I've just finished reading your book!" So I figured that was probably the greatest day of my life, bar none. That was just the most wonderful thing that had happened. He said, "Yes, fine, what you're telling me, and I know your book. We would like you to come to work. But come upstairs after lunch. I want to talk to you again."

We went up to his office--and that whole West Wing at that time, I don't know why just walking around it, it's like some kind of a Greek maze. I see it now, it seems like a very simple layout; but I remember going around and around in those corridors, and it was just devastating. I couldn't find anybody or anything. He said to me, "I want you to meet a couple of people," and sent me down to meet Bob Kintner, and a couple of other people. Then I came back to his office, and he said, "There's one other person I want you to meet." I said, "Fine." I guess this must have been about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and he took me--if there had been a maze before, this was just going through what is now that portico down under the basement of the Mansion, and in this little elevator; but I had no idea where I was. We could have been walking toward the Treasury Building for all I knew. He didn't tell me where we were going.

We ended up outside the President's bedroom. This was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon; and I still really wasn't sure where we were, but it was beginning to dawn on me that it was looking pretty plush, and that it wasn't just some middle-level bureaucrat we were going to see.

So Bill knocked, and we went into the President's bedroom. He was there in his blue pajamas--preparing to take his nap--with Henry Ford, Jr., who had just had lunch with them, and they were just saying goodbye and talking about holding the line on wage-price guildelines or something, I think. So I was introduced to the President in his pajamas, and to Henry Ford, and Moyers was there. Then Henry Ford left; and Moyers and the President and I sat down in the

bedroom and spoke for about fifteen-twenty minutes.

I say "we" spoke. The President spoke at great length about what he expected of staff aides, and told that old story about Tommy Corcoran as to how he was useful only until people started talking about Tommy Corcoran's program instead of Franklin Roosevelt's program; and used the phrase that "the White House staff aides ought to have a passion for anonymity". He always makes it clear not just anonymity, but a passion for anonymity. I just kind of sat there, saying, "Yes, sir, yes, sir, yes sir." That was about the extent of my conversation until Moyers--I had mentioned some certain ideas for speeches to Moyers at lunch, and Moyers finally saw that it was the President talking, not me, and he wanted me to say something, I guess. He asked me, "Why don't you tell the President what you said at lunch about certain kinds of speeches?" I spoke briefly for a few minutes, and then we left.

Moyers then took me by Marvin Watson's office and said that the President had indicated he wanted me onboard--to give me the forms and to get me processed pretty quickly. I have a great admiration for Bill. He was a very adroit operator. As I recall, I don't recall specifically, when he took me in to the President, he sort of indicated that I was already onboard. Then when he took me from the President, he indicated that this was the guy the President wanted to hire. So he was sort of moving around pretty well.

B: At this stage, let me ask--by now, you must have a clear impression of who hired you. Was it Moyers? I mean, who was the drive behind getting you--?

W: Well, Moyers was, and I'll tell you why I know it. Moyers was a good

speechwriter himself, but he was at that time Press Secretary and really the number one substantive aide as well--and deeply immersed in Vietnam and the domestic program, as well as being Press Secretary. So he didn't have very much time to be writing speeches. Harry McPherson was on the staff, but relatively new on the staff as I understand at that time. Harry is a very good speech writer, but was on the staff not as a speech writer, but as Special Counsel for the President and was doing things like airline rate cases and things that a special counsel is supposed to be doing--reviewing that stuff. He was writing some speeches, but not the major domo of the effort. Doug Cater was on the staff. He's a fairly good speech writer. He's a better essayist and other kind of writer than he is a speech writer, and he had Ervin Duggan working for him who is a very good speech writer. But Cater was involved primarily doing HEW liaison work--substantive work again.

So as I understood it at that time, the only two full-time guys that he had working as speech writers were Will Sparks and Bob Hardesty, who had been brought over from the agencies. There was less than wholehearted pleasure with their efforts at that time, as I recall.

So Bill was just swamped. They were planning these big trips, with many, many speeches; and Bill was really ending up working on these speeches--doing the editing on them, doing some of the writing on them late at night, and needed help. So he asked me to come down. I assume that he had read my book and had had that experience with that Indianapolis speech, and that he was the driving force behind it. But he got the President's okay on it.

B: Did the President say he read your book?

W: Yes, the President sort of pointed up to a bookshelf, and he said, "I've read some of your book." Whether he said he read the whole thing or--I think he said he had read some of it. He indicated that he was familiar with it.

B: Was that little lecture on anonymity and the staff aide standard operating procedure, and had something happened recently to prompt that?

W: I suspect that it was standard operating procedure except that I don't think very many people when they come on the staff get a face-to-face lengthy [interview]. This was probably twenty minutes, maybe it was a half-hour that we spent, I really don't know. [I don't believe many] get that kind of face-to-face treatment from the President. Perhaps some of the special assistants or something like that did get that kind. But I know later on they brought on other speech writers who spent years here and never even met the President, I mean really face-to-face.

B: Let me ask another question that you may not even be able to answer. Did you get the impression that that speech at that time might have been directed as much at Moyers as at you? There has been some speculation that by that time Moyers was getting too much personal notice for the President's taste.

W: It never occurred to me at that time he was talking to me. But it's not at all improbable that he was talking to both of us because you're right, Moyers, as I said, was generally regarded as the second most powerful man in the government. His pictures were on the covers of news magazines and that kind of thing. As I've learned subsequently, that's not the kind of thing the President appreciates--and for pretty

good reasons, as a matter of fact. Because when they start talking about Bill Moyers' programs, and Joe Califano's programs, or Tommy Corcoran's programs, this is not what you're here for.

The President feels this particularly strongly about speech writers. Obviously, anyone who knows anything about government--a guy is not going to sit down and write his own speeches if he's giving one or two speeches a day. So people write speeches for other people. [Richard] Goodwin, for example--Moyers told me, and Moyers had a penchant sort of for overexaggerating things a little bit, "Wattenberg, you're going to be the next Dick Goodwin down here. You're going to be the guy who's going to handle this whole speech thing." Which, you know, sounded delightful to me. I was no more capable of--you know, both Goodwin and Moyers had been working in government for five, six, eight years, I don't know how long, and knew how the place ran. I knew nothing about government other than a general knowledge. But the value you are to a president occurred to me later, in terms of who you know down here who is trying to reach the president to whom you can be a funnel or a transmitter to and from.

B: Does that apply to speech writers, too?

W: No, it doesn't. But I was doing a little more than speech writing, and subsequently came to do a good deal more than just speech writing. There was sort of a funny breakout here. There were some guys who did nothing but write speeches. Then there were some guys, Cater, McPherson, John Roche, Ervin Duggan, on a somewhat lower level who were involved in substance in speech writing. I was sort of in the

middle. I didn't have any specific substantive responsibilities say the way Cater or McPherson did, but I was sticking my nose into places and getting involved in any number of things. We put out a Negro report two consecutive years following the Riot Commission which became a relatively controversial document. It took many months to prepare it. This was my idea, and I ramrodded the whole thing through. It reached a stage after Moyers left where I was memoing the President directly on certain project ideas, and certain comments, and speech ideas where I was generating my own stuff; and felt immediately--because this was not a President who would sit down with an individual speech writer on an individual speech and say, "Ben, we're going to have a speech coming up on such-and-such. What I'd like to say is this and this and this. Why don't you tell them the story about such-and-such?" If that were the way it worked, that would be fine. But that's not the way it worked. He didn't say, you know, write a thousand words--You'd get a message from somebody, depending on who was doing what then, either through Kintner's office, to Moyers, or later on Cater, and then later on McPherson, and then later on Maguire was sort of doing the to and fro on it. You know, there was a thousand word speech due on such-and-such, and this was the occasion. You would write the speech, and the President--there were three sorts of things that he would do; he would throw it in the wastepaper basket and say, "This is no God-damned good, I want something different"; or he'd say, "This is fine," and deliver it; or in some instances, he'd do some editing on it--and he's a very good editor. When you're on the mark, he's willing to--I'm talking now not about the State of the Union

type, major Vietnam messages where he would certainly work specifically and directly with the speech; but even on a major non-major speech, on an address to a group of 10,000 people here in Washington at some convention which would be quoted on the front pages, if he was relatively pleased with the speech. . .I know in my instance, I don't know how this worked with other people, but he was prepared to go with it. His instruction might be, "Cut it by 300 words," that kind of thing; which can leave you, if you don't have your feet on the ground, with the kind of feeling that, "You write words, the President speaks them." You learn after awhile that it may seem that way, but it just doesn't work that way. I found myself all throughout these years pretty much in tune philosophically with what the President was doing so I felt that when I was writing I was writing things that I believed in and he believed in and that was fine. But you find out obviously and very rapidly that when there is a divergence--in other words, a staff man--it's a very difficult role for a guy who has been in public life as an author or something writing under his own name previously--it's a very difficult role, staff role, particularly when you're not encouraged, for example, the way Kennedy encouraged people to get their own personal views and their own out. Johnson did not want it and for very good reasons as we've discussed. So it's sort of a hard role in that way.

B: Most of you seem to have maintained it. I doubt if your average well-informed citizen could name a speech writer right now.

W: You know, I think that's probably true. I guess in a way it's good, and in a way he hurt himself. He had here--still has--but I

know when I came down here I had kind of figured that the Kennedy staff was this whole Camelot deal. They were, you know, the beautiful people--bright and young and intelligent and everything else. And the image I had in my mind of the Johnson staff was Walter Jenkins, George Reedy--kind of old midwestern sorts of people, not old but well into middle-age. And I came down here--I was at that time not quite thirty-three--and had always as it happened hung around with people slightly older than me and was always regarded as a kid. I came down here and Moyers was six months younger than me. You know, the top aides in this government were very bright, very young, very aggressive people, that I would think having spoken to some people subsequently through them were at least equal in brains and youth and ability and aggressiveness to the Kennedy staff. Kennedy reaped a tremendous benefit from this. You know, here were these bright young people who were giving him advice and they were so hip and clued in; and Johnson never got any of this. He got it a little bit of it with Moyers, and Moyers in that respect helped the President although that, as you know, kind of turned sour after awhile, and there was a feedback on it.

But I came down here and the guys that I was working with were Califano who is thirty-five, and Larry Levinson who was thirty-six, and Moyers who thirty-two, McPherson who was thirty-seven; and Califano had a whole bunch of people, very young guys, still has them, Jim Gaither, I guess he was still here at that time, who couldn't have been more than twenty-seven or twenty-eight. Tom Johnson was twenty-five at that time. It was a very young, very alert staff. Cater, I guess, was the old man in the thing, and he was only about

forty-two or forty-three. So this was a very young [staff]. I kind of laugh. Nixon is saying now that he's going to have the youngest staff in the White House. If he gets any younger than our staff, he's going to have people with diaper pins running around here because it just, as I see it, can't be done effectively.

So, in any event, I came down here. Hayes Redmon was working sort of as Bill's right-hand man on substantive matters, which were Vietnam and a whole lot of things. I was sort of his left-hand man on the speech operation. What was happening was Kintner had an operation where Sparks and Hardesty worked for him, and Maguire, as he planned several trips of these ten big trips that were supposed to be planned.

B: This was in the Congressional campaign?

W: In the Congressional campaign of '66. These speeches were for the most part bubbling up through the agencies. (Interruption) I don't know if Maguire was doing much, he was sort of a traffic cop for a traffic cop, who was Kintner. Kintner chose not to exercise, as I recall it, any editorial function at all. He was really the traffic man on it. Sparks and Hardesty were doing some of the writing and doing some of the editing on the speech drafts that would come in from Interior or State or from wherever they were coming in. Moyers would get them maybe two days before the speech was supposed to be delivered, and for the most part those first few weeks he was turning them over to me. We were working on them together would probably be more accurate. And they were really dreadful. Stuff came out that was just inane, didn't say anything, empty-headed, wooden kind of prose, as far as I was

concerned.

B: Are you talking about content or style or both?

W: I'm talking about both. The few speeches that came through good--I know on this one trip we did in New York. McPherson wrote the speech for the University of Rhode Island, Brown University, a law and order kind of speech--what later came to be known as a law and order kind of speech--and that was a good speech because he wrote it and he was writing for the President. Cater and Duggan wrote a speech for Ellenville, New York, on HEW, and that was a good solid speech. But the stuff that was coming in from this Kintner channel through the agencies and up through Sparks and Hardesty, my own opinion was, and Moyers' opinion which really I was reflecting because I didn't know a hell of a lot, was that there was a great deal wrong with the speeches.

B: Did Moyers make this kind of judgment himself, or did the President get in on it, too?

W: I suspect that Moyers caught most of it early, but these were the kind of speeches, as I've come later to see, that had they gotten to the President, they would have been just bucked right back because the President, as I said before, is a damned good editor and has an immediate sense of the substantive. If a speech doesn't say something, it comes back and he says, you know, "Let's have it say something." So these were, I thought, kind of empty, vacuous sorts of things for the most part. So what I was doing then, I was writing a couple of speeches. For example, I'm just trying to think--I was doing some writing of speeches, but for the most part taking these speeches and frequently going bac, because we were

working on a very short deadline, going back to the research material that they themselves had from the agencies and adding in some stuff that I knew, perhaps getting some data from the Census Bureau, talking to Moyers, taking their speeches, putting new leads on them, new ends on them, new middles on them, and rewriting, recasting, editing their speeches--working with Moyers.

B: Redoing the whole thing.

W: Well, in some instances redoing the whole thing; in some instances keeping their substantive middle section and putting in a new beginning and an end; and in some cases just doing light editing. But it was a hell of a lot of work to be done.

B: Let me ask a question here, because it comes up now. When you're doing that to a speech, when you're preparing it for the President's delivery, do you get instructions from the President or Moyers on the President's style?

W: I'll come to that a little later because it's going to come up very logically in a little while. Let me just tell you this, that the first speech that I ever wrote was for the President of the United States. That's how much speech writing experience I had had. I had never written a speech, I guess I had written some notes toward a speech that I once gave, but I had never written a speech for anybody even myself, a written speech. The first speech I ever wrote was for the President of the United States, which was kind of a shocking thought when it occurred to me one day. In any event, frequently Moyers and I in this period--I came to work August 11, this probably lasted for about a month or six weeks, I would guess -I was working with Moyers on Moyers' staff on these speeches--on the two-or-so nights

before a trip was to start, he and I would be working till midnight, till one, till two, till three o'clock in the morning--one night I remember. He had a good bottle of bourbon up there, and occasionally we'd have a drink late at night--

B: Preacher Moyers wasn't all that much of a preacher, huh?

W: He's a pretty good preacher, I guess. He was a very eloquent guy, a very able guy, a very ambitious guy, and a good guy generally at that time to be working for, because he had a lot of--You know, just the way later when you really needed something from somebody you could say, "Well, the President wants such-and-such"; but there was a time when, say, Bill Moyers asked me to call--of course, it wasn't quite the same as saying, "The President," but it carried a hell of a lot of weight both within the White House and outside the White House. You know, there was a saying going around, "You know, all the Special Assistants are equal except Moyers is more equal."--the old Orwell line. So we worked very late on a number of nights getting together some of these trips.

I think that was probably the last time--that was the last gasp of that sort of campaigning and that sort of going to the public that the President did. I think it was probably the first time that we really hit some demonstrators. I remember a couple of times--I took a few of these trips with him. We went up on Long Island one fall day. We had something out in Suffolk County somewhere, a nice setting for a speech in the amphitheater. 98 percent of the crowd was delighted to see the President; but they had a hundred or so demonstrators. This was sort of the beginning. He may have had

earlier contact with demonstrators. I just don't recall them, but I know that we began running into a little bit of it, not much. The trips generally, as I recall them, were very successful.

B: Do you recall the President's reaction to the demonstrators?

W: No. I don't, because I wasn't working directly with him. I would say from that time--with the exception of that one conference that Moyers and I and the President had that first day I was here--actually before I was working here--other than meetings with a number of other people or when I might see him and he might chat just for a minute or two, I never really sat down again with him in an alone situation up till this date. Of course, we had many memos going back and forth, which is a pretty good way to work really. You know, you can get your own thoughts down and tell him what you think, and then he says, "Yes, go ahead, do it," "It's no good," or he'll frequently--he has called me a few times, but you most frequently get back his reaction in writing on your memo, or through Marvin Watson or Jim Jones or somebody who would say, "Tell Wattenberg that this is good," or, "Tell Wattenberg that this is no good," or, "Tell Wattenberg to do such-and-such." So I did not have a lot of personal contact with the President; I saw him occasionally and spoke to him occasionally, but nothing in a deep, personal, substantive way. I never had that relationship with him.

But I was writing all through this time many, many speeches. I don't know--Barbara [Lowe] [Wattenberg's research assistant], what do we have in the book now--probably seventy speeches? Fifty speeches? Those are the books there, and it staggers you as to how much writing goes on.

B: These are the fifty or seventy you mentioned are your speeches only?

W: Oh, yes.

B: The ones you have written?

W: The ones I have written. And for the most part--well, I don't know--I guess you kind of get the feeling here that the things you work on are major speeches, and the things other people work on are not really that important. But a number of these were sort of big and relatively important speeches, I think. Again, they weren't, for the most part, the State of the Union, Vietnam type speeches, but just immediately--whichare after all, no more than two or three or four a year at the most; although I've had an input on some of these speeches. But Harry would usually handle the really big ones, although even a couple of those I had something to do with.

B: The kind of speech writing you are doing here when you first sign on, are you also involved in policy as well as just the words?

W: That's an almost impossible question to answer.

B: That's the reason I asked it, because you wonder how you can separate policy from the words.

W: That's right. You're not involved in policy in terms of generating new programs, although occasionally ideas expressed in speeches--you find out after awhile that--you know, you write something and then a year later you see OEO or HEW or somebody quoted it. They say as "The President said very emphatically just in July of this year such-and-such, such-and-such, and that's clearly what this government wants to do." Well, this is something that you wrote at 4 o'clock in the morning or 2 o'clock in the morning, and the President delivered it. As I say, you become--when you're doing it right as

a staff man--an instrument of the President; and this is not necessarily a happy role for a guy who has frequently felt that he's an instrument of himself. But that's what a staff man's job is. That's how he viewed it, and I think it's essentially correct.

I guess you can view this staff thing in two different ways. I know, for example, recently the President called us all in and read the riot act to us about people talking to the press, because stuff was getting out. He had us in at the meeting there, and he pulled out a Wall Street Journal thing and said, "One leading White House aide said such-and-such, such-and-such," and he started looking up and down this table, and he said--"top White House aide," that was what he said, "Top White House aide." He looked up and down the table and he says, "If I ever find that son-of-a-bitch top White House aide, boy, I'm going to have his head. Who is he?", quote, the President.

When you talk and these journalists that take you out to lunch listen, you can say, "It's only my personal opinion, but this is what I think," you end up talking as White House aide; and frequently getting the story wrong or speculating on things that he doesn't particularly want speculated on. At that time he was very upset because there was stuff coming out about these Vietnam negotiations that even he didn't know about. That was on the international scene. On the domestic stuff, this particular thing said, you know, it started telling what his 1970 budget recommendations were going to be. He said, "How the hell did this top White House aide know, and how did the Wall Street Journal know? I don't know it yet. Charlie Zwick doesn't know it yet, because he hasn't got the stuff in from

the agencies." So he got very vehement about that. That's one way of viewing this thing, for example, an aide's relationship with the press.

On the other hand, there have been times when the President had had us all in. He had several meetings shortly after I got here with the young staff; and one of the things he said was, "You all need to get to know people in the press, and tell our side of the story, see what's going on so we can have an interplay back and forth." I know I've been encouraged a couple of times by Tom Johnson and George Christian in the press office--"Fine, you ought to go out and meet the press." Then every once in awhile you get the lashback, because something you may have said antagonizes the President, and he says, "Well, what's so-and-so going out and talking for? Who's leaking?"

B: Is it the sum total of that kind of whiplash to keep you away from the press? I mean, if you're told to go out and be friendly with the press, and then if you're lectured for--don't you end up staying away?

W: Well, you know, there was always a danger in it; and yet you know from your own feelings of these things that if the press calls--I guess some of the people there just absolutely ducked press calls, just won't talk to them, won't comment on anything. I know I had a number of these people down here in Washington--press people, people I knew as a writer--a few of them anyway. It seems to me that had the White House staff adopted the attitude that we were not talking to press, that would have been the worst thing that could have happened to the President! And I think the President was

aware of this. And therefore he was between the devil and the deep blue sea on it. He knew that the press had to talk to staff people and had to be available to talk to them. And they had a system here which I never really approved of-- I could see, you know, why he did it--of press reports, where when you spoke to a guy of the press, you submitted a report to George Christian, supposedly for coordination purposes, that kind of thing. But the President ended up seeing these things.

B: When was that instituted?

W: As far as I know, it was always going on as long as I've been here. Although there was a specific memo that Tom Johnson sent around--I guess it would be early '67--that outlined that, you know, if you talked with reporters, would you please send in a report.

B: That must have been right after Moyers left, somewhere around there.

W: Yes. I'm not sure, but my feeling is that it probably existed before.

B: Is it still in effect?

W: It's still in effect. I think--frequently honored in the breach by some people. And even if you make a press report and you write a sentence or two, "I had lunch with so-and-so, or so-and-so called about such-and-such," you know, it depends what you say in it. But just the idea, it made it kind of like a kiddie corps instead of like responsible people. I know I've spoken to the press on a number of occasions, and I don't think--again, with people I've become friendly with or people I was friendly with before. You know, I got into heated arguments, and have almost without exception stuck up for the President, not because I was doing it in order to go out

and shelter the President but because I really believed in what he was doing. And a lot of these guys were just the guys who were giving him a hard time on Vietnam and on a number of things.

And it seems to me that if you can talk freely to these people and they know you're talking freely--after all, there has to be some assumption of loyalty from the President to the staff. Otherwise you've got no damned business being here. I have found, I think--without overstating it--that when you can talk freely to these people and you're a decent kind of a person who is not out to poor-mouth the President, you can if you want to, but it just doesn't make any--you wouldn't be working here, you know, if you wanted to be--because it's not that kind of a relationship.

B: Have you ever been asked to write a speech which had a line in it which you did not agree with?

W: No. Again, the process, as far as I was working on--You see, I think that with most of the writers here didn't come that way so much, that you've got an instruction write a speech that says such-and-such and such-and-such. "Here's the occasion, write a speech." So you wrote what you thought the President ought to be saying, or what ought to be said, what was good for America. It was a whole lot of mixed lines as to whether you're working for the President or the Presidency or the country or the party. It's all kind of mixed in together. But I cannot recall having written a line here that I'm not willing to subscribe to, largely because the direction did not come from above, write us a speech that says such-and-such.

There are some general philosophic kinds of backgrounds and matrixes sort of against which you're writing, which I'm not sure--I

suspect that as soon as I get out into private life I will--. One of the themes of my book that I had written was that one of the great dangers in American society are not the various domestic or international crises that we face, but the act of crisis mongering, of going out and saying, "Wow, look how terrible this is; we need a program on this; we need action on this!" You know, one of the ways that you get action through Congress on stuff like that is by rhetorical overkill, saying, "Good Lord, look at all these poor people. People are starving." Kennedy said, "20 million people are going to bed hungry every night." Well, you know, a lot of them are on diets and things like that. But that's one of the ways you get action.

B: You pointed out in your book--I don't know if this is an exact quote, but the guy that says the glass is half-empty is not necessarily trying to put something over on the guy that says the glass is half-full.

W: That's exactly it. So when you asked the question did I ever write anything I didn't believe, I suspect that in writing about a specific problem again and again and again--or different problems, a series of problems--and after all, you write largely about problems in the Presidency to seek to--. And the President, it's the strangest thing. This is probably the greatest crisis-mongerer in the history of the world--Lyndon Johnson. Yet every time he turns around and says, "But you know America is still a pretty good place to live in," the press sends up the balloon and says, "Lyndon Johnson is blowing his own horn; he's congratulating himself on what a wonderful place this is," and "Ha, ha!" Is he looking at the same country

we're looking at. So, only in that respect, in that you end up writing about a drumbeat of problems rather than--I tend frequently to personally look at things from a more optimistic viewpoint.

But even then, I know I always attempted in the stuff I wrote to keep this thing in perspective, to write the good and the bad. I always felt that the stuff--the messages particularly that came out of Califano's shop were such a--put them all together and they add up to a dirge as to how terrible everything is.

Then comes election year--you know, this comes from the Presidency, you know, "By God, Lyndon Johnson said we've got a major problem; people can't breathe free," and they have a way--Johnson likes good, punching language, and he's right, you know; because that's the kind of language that he ought to be talking. That's his kind of language. And he tends to put the good, heavy, loaded phrase on a problem. And you talk about the crises in the cities, and the crime wave, and the population explosion--all these expressions. Then comes an election year when, after all, you've never had a more prosperous America. You've got things going on in this country--I mean, good things--that I don't think anybody ten years ago would have dreamed could have been happening. And then you turn around and you say, "By God"--you know the basic theme of any incumbent's platform has got to be, "You've never had it so good." You know, this is the old political dichotomy between the outs view with alarm, and the ins point with pride. Except he spent his whole tenure in here viewing with alarm; and then came '66 an election year, and then came this campaign, or what we thought was going to be a campaign--you end up pointing with pride. Then you really get into somewhat of an

apparent credibility problem. You know, both things can be true. You can be pointing with pride and viewing with alarm of specifics, which is really what he was doing. But it seems to me--I thought particularly in the messages to Congress, mostly coming out of Califano's shop--they were heavily crises-oriented. And I think in the long run, and there's no way to prove it, this set up in some way the crisis atmosphere in America that we went through in this last campaign, about how everything stinks, and look at how bad everything is.

And I mentioned this Negro report before. This was after the riots in Detroit in '67, in Newark and Detroit. And the President established the Kerner Commission. There was rhetoric in the newspapers and coming out of here also, but primarily in the newspapers, about the Negro problem in America that would make it appear that--I mean, the standard Stokely Carmichael-Rap Brown black militant rhetoric was that everything was getting worse in the ghettos. The places were just terrible, conditions for Negroes were just a disaster. The gaps between whites and Negroes were getting worse. You know, right throughout this I've been in frequent touch with the Census Bureau looking at these numbers, as I had done in This U.S.A. and the social and economic progress made by Negroes over the last five years, three years, eight years, ten years--no matter what you want to measure it from--has been absolutely astonishing, particularly the last five years. I mean there are numbers that as a looker at numbers that I just wouldn't believe--you know, the ratio of Negro income to white income. For example, we just published this second part of this Negro report which I was also sort of instrumental in putting together

and getting out. Although it was published by the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, it was my idea that it be done, and I worked on it with them--showed that in the course of three years, I think it is, or four years, Negro income in comparison to white income went up from 53 percent to 62 percent. That's nine points on a base of 53 in three years, still of course a tragically low figure--a disaster. I mean, this includes the South; in the non-Southern states it's probably up around 75-80 percent, also with a very sharp recent rise.

Again, you know, the absolutes show--this is what I was saying, you can point with pride and view with alarm at the same time. There has been Negro movement in this country in the last five years--I'm not talking about bills. The President always said, "Well, we passed so many bills." I'm talking about the actual demographic thing as to how they affect people. Astonishing progress in this country for Negroes and for whites--certainly for Negroes.

B: May I interrupt you here--does your suggestion that these reports be published go directly to the President?

W: Either directly or indirectly. In the first instance, I think I suggested it to Doug Cater, who--by that time I was sort of working, I was going to say, on his staff, on Cater's. I wasn't really; I was sort of on my own, but working through his office kind of thing. I suggested it to Cater, that it be done, and he thought it was a good idea; and I went ahead and started working on it. Then after a few weeks along and I had some data actually, I think either Cater and I sent up a joint memo, or I think probably Cater sent up a memo saying, "There's a project that Wattenberg has been

working on which you ought to know something about. Shall we go ahead with it?" He said, "Yes, do it and do it fast. Bring these people in, and let's talk to them." Both of these reports ultimately ended up as the subject of Cabinet meetings; and in one of them I actually did the presentation. Cliff Alexander and I did the presentation to the Cabinet with charts and everything.

B: Was there an opportunity to see the President's reaction to this kind of thing?

W: Yes. He was very impressed by it all. And he did deliver some speeches about it. In fact, this civil rights speech that he just gave a couple of days ago to the Urban League that Harry wrote, he used this data that we developed. It's funny. There was some criticism of it when it came in--said, "Oh, this is overly optimistic." The way the press reacts to these things is when data conforms to their stereotypes, then it's accurate. When the data shows something that doesn't fit the cliches that they have been mouthing for the previous year, the immediate thing is to say the government is fudging and is lying.

Of course this stuff came out as a counterpoint to the Kerner Commission. The Kerner Commission, for my money, bought every silly cliche about Negroes in the book--every one of them without exception. And this stuff in many instances, although they used a lot of the data that Census and DLS published in this document--without credit incidentally--you know, came up with this solution, with this thing that America is splitting into two societies and things are getting worse for Negroes. Then this thing came out and everybody said, well, you know--and Johnson did not react wisely to the Kerner Commission report, as you know.

B: There has been speculation that he was quite dismayed at the Kerner Commission report, if only by his silence.

W: I guess that's probably so. The Kerner Commission Report does mention it ultimately--that there has been tremendous progress. The summary volume of it talks exclusively about how terrible things are; how the guilt is on the white races and this kind of thing, and doesn't mention what has been. . .I mean, you know, after having had that kind of progress in the last three years or four years of his Presidency as of that time, and not mentioning it seems absurb to me on their part. I think he was probably right to be personally put off. He was very foolish, I think, in letting that pique show publicly. He's usually very wise about that. And I think it would have been a very bad thing for the President of the United States to say, "I agree. We're a white racist nation," because that would have been a disaster. I think he very easily though could have called them all in or issued a statement saying. . . .

You know, there's something very ironic about that Kerner Commission Report. When it came out, and I had something to do with that speech where he announced the appointment of the Kerner Commission. I wrote sort of one of the early drafts of it that were then later revised and revised and revised. This was after Detroit. The great comment from the liberal press was, "Great Christ, here are all of these cities burning down." You know, Detroit was leveled. And the President's response was, "Say a prayer," and appoint the commission; you know, "Ha, ha, ha, Lyndon Johnson. What a jerk he is!"

Then six or eight months later the report comes out. And all of a sudden the Kerner Commission is God's gift to America! You know, they

really saw the truth of American society, and God, what great recommendations they put out! As if this was some instrumentality of government that created itself! This was Johnson's commission! These were his guys he put on it. [John] Lindsey was appointed by Lyndon Johnson; [Otto] Kerner was appointed by Lyndon Johnson. So it seemed to me at that time, and I gather there were a number of people who said he should accept it publicly, you know. There was a way he could have said--you know, "last summer after these riots, I asked this very distinguished commission to look into all of the things, this was my commission--" you know, without saying it quite that way, you know--"They've worked very hard, they've come up with a number of conclusions, with a number of recommendations. I'm going to send them out to the government. We're going to see which ones we already have implemented, which ones we can implement, what we can do," and could have been very gracious about it all. Instead he chose to sort of smolder in silence for awhile. He said it off the record and then ultimately on the record--he spoke to a group of Negro publishers and I guess later ultimately got on the record, but by then, you know, it wasn't news any more. It was three weeks later.

B: The report you're talking about, your Negro reports, got nowhere the amount of coverage of the Kerner Commission Report.

W: Of course, they didn't, because when you say something is good, you don't get any coverage, or you get coverage that says either the figures are inaccurate or the President is blowing his own horn. It is almost incredible. When you say something is bad or when somebody else says something is bad, that seeps into the national

consciousness and it's just regarded as absolute fact. When you say that there is progress made, or that something good is happening, it's just--and this has been the question I think of his whole Presidency in terms of his public image and credibility and people not believing him and everything else. It reached a stage, ultimately, of national selective perception so that people tuned out what they didn't want to hear. I've been in conversations recently, a few months ago--now, Johnson is sort of patronized, and he really was a good President. But there was period there where it was really tough on him, and everybody was down on him. It was when Bobby Kennedy was going out and talking about the poor and the black and the Indians and all that kind of stuff. They'd say to me at cocktail parties--here guys working in Washington, government people, working maybe in OEO, saying things like, "Why doesn't the President ever say anything about Negroes? Bobby Kennedy is saying all these things. Why doesn't the President ever say anything about Negroes?" Well, great Christ, Lyndon Johnson hasn't done anything but say things about Negroes--about race and about Negroes and poverty. That's all he talks about domestically. But people didn't want to choose to believe that he was talking about it, because Kennedy and [Eugene] McCarthy were going around the country at that time saying, "We're not doing enough; things are getting worse in the ghettos; there is 40-percent unemployed." Kennedy used some numbers that were you wouldn't believe how wrong. I mean, he made statements like--one speech said that 40 percent of the Negro men are unemployed, when the figure was like 5 percent. I guess he sort of fudged it and said "in some cities," that kind of

thing. But you know, there was one Bureau of Labor Statistics report that dealt with something called sub-employment, not unemployment, sub-employment which he of course immediately read as unemployment. Sub-employment, a guy can be working forty to sixty hours a week, if he isn't making enough money, he's sub-employed or part-time employed, he's sub-employed. There's a very strange definition which I think they've stopped using. But anyway he went around saying as to how terrible everything was.

Abe Ribicoff had these hearings on the Hill saying, "Why aren't we doing enough on this? Why aren't we doing enough on that? It's all because we're spending this money on Vietnam." Of course, Ribicoff was Secretary of HEW for two years under Kennedy, and they didn't do a Goddamned thing, but that of course never really came up.

So people chose to tune out certain things that Lyndon Johnson was saying during his Presidency. They just wouldn't--and it worked with Vietnam also. I've been at cocktail parties here in Washington where you can make this case--I'm not sure it's a hundred percent accurate case, but at least you draw this historical analysis between the '30s and the '60s, you know, Munich and that whole kind of thing. It's not a direct pointer. You can't say because one was true, the other was true. But it's a valid and interesting sort of comparison to make, if only because there might be validity to the comparison. I don't think anybody in his right mind would say, "What was true then is true now, and therefore we have to make a stand in Vietnam." But it's an important and interesting relevant historical comparison at least to be presented, which Johnson presented again and again. And it came to

be kind of a big joke in the liberal community. "Ah, well, he's talking about Munich. You see, he thinks in the 1930s. He's got 1930 type solutions. He's a New Dealer, he's not a New Frontiersman." Mostly crap! But I was at a party once and we got into this Vietnam discussion which everybody always gets into, and I sort of traced out how you could make an intelligent comparison between the '30s and the '60s, and possibly draw some lessons from it. I finished and he said, "You know, that's really interesting. Why doesn't Lyndon Johnson ever say that?" And if he had said it once, he had said it a hundred times, to the point of it becoming a gag.

So it reached the stage here--and it's a funny thing, somehow within the corporate press mechanism, it isn't individual guys necessarily out to knife the President. But the way the media and press works, television and the press, there were things that he was saying that were perfectly reasonable, perfectly accurate, perfectly relevant, that either were mocked or just nobody listened.

B: You've been describing the press as if it were a kind of anti-Johnson monolithic block. Is that your view of it?

W: You know, the press, of course, regards the people in the Administration around the President and the President as just paranoic about the press. I come out of here and I get the feeling that anyone coming out of here after these last two years has really grave misgivings about the press in the United States. Because the way this man was covered was just inaccurate, was just plain inaccurate. This is a guy who was calumnied, maligned, slandered, with, it seemed like, no real effort to destroy. Now it's beginning to come out that

Lyndon Johnson was looking for peace all along, which is all he was saying. But that was a big gag! You know, "I'm looking for peace, I'll go anywhere any time." "Yeah, sure you're looking for peace; meanwhile you're blowing up and you're burning up all these poor little people; you're drinking Napalm for breakfast," and all this kind of stuff.

B: Was this mostly by omission, or by deliberate distortion?

W: You know, it wasn't by either. I know these guys in the press. They were not trying to--some of them were--it was sort of by the general process. When the President made a speech, they reported it, so it wasn't by omission. They didn't distort what he said in the news pages, and yet the columnists certainly distorted it, the commentators distorted it. They never gave the guy credit for an honorable instinct. Even now you read stuff and they say--through this whole campaign--that what Lyndon Johnson was interested in, rather than being interested in the Democratic party or Hubert Humphrey or even the United States, what he was interested in was his place in history. That was the big thing, you know. "Lyndon Johnson concentrating on his place in history--that's why he had a bomb halt, so he'd be known as a peace President instead of a war President." Well, this is just bunk! To accept that means that you've had a devil in the White House! The guy has done things in Vietnam and home that are either good or bad, and he has done them because he takes that job, that responsibility of being President, about as seriously and about as historically--I mean, in other words, his feeling has been in everything--And as we've discussed, he has got some strange personal idiosyncracies that make it difficult to

work with him, that aren't always the best kind of staff things, but those are minor historical footnotes. The guy has tried to do, and has for the most part been inordinately successful, I think.

B: In this matter of relations with the press though and general public, there have been fairly well-recorded episodes, maybe small ones, but little things like secretiveness amounting to deviousness. The fault is not all on one side, is it?

W: Well, I don't know. There have been these things, there's no doubt about it, that he likes to play his cards very close to the vest and I guess on occasion on relatively small matters--really on relatively small matters--has misled the press. They always point to this one when they said--was he going to replace McNamara or Westmoreland. I guess it was McNamara?

B: You mean the episode of he is not looking for a replacement because as it turned out later, he had already found one?

W: That's right. He had already--well, that's a cute kind of a thing, and I guess it's deceiving the press, it makes them feel kind of like jerks. And it's stupid on the President's part to play that game, I think. But there have been relatively few instances which they talk about again and again and again as if these were some major policy kinds of things. And they just haven't been. I mean, they've dealt with trivia.

And this is one of the things in the press's coverage of Lyndon Johnson. You know, they talk about that he's a crude earthy man, and that he showed his scar, and that he drove his car at a high speed, and how he likes to tell off-color stories and things what? I don't even know if these things are true or not, but what

difference does it make? Christ, the guy was dealing with the life and death matters of western civilization! And I think history will show that he did the right things for the country, I mean in terms of--not necessarily the country in 1967 or '68, but in terms of the country in 1977 and '78, which is really what a President. . . . It's so funny, the way they take these cliches and they say, "Well, Johnson's eye is on the history books." Well, that's almost a working definition of a good President. He's the one man in this country really who's paid a salary to have his eye on a history book, not on a newspaper. This is the guy who ought to be doing things not for "his role in history," but this era. He's the guy who's in charge of seeing that the things we've done now are going to look good ten years from now and twenty years from now, even at the cost of personal popularity or perhaps of some kinds of national distress at the time. You get into this kind of a calculus which must be an incredibly difficult one to bear personally. You know, are you willing to sacrifice 20-30,000 American kids in Vietnam on a proposition that you're really helping to preserve world peace and America's security ten years down the road. And of course you never know the answer. You have some ideas and you have some guesses, and you have some hunches, and you have some history to go on; and you've ultimately got to make this decision. And this man doesn't make it, as people have written, on the basis of he's a Texan, and they always want to fight the Battle of the Alamo again. He makes these decisions very seriously on what he thinks is best for the country. I think he has been right.

But what I've objected to against all these liberal dove kind

of critics has been that they never gave him the credit for making what he thought was the honest decision, albeit the wrong one from their point of view. They never gave him the credit. They said, "Oh, well, he listens to generals." That was one cliche that went around. "Johnson's problem is that he listens to generals;" then of course in the next breath they would start quoting--well, they would play their own general, you know we ought to go into an enclave here--we ought to send troops up Route 16, and we ought to do encirclement, and then we ought to not do search and destroy, then they'd play generals. And then they'd start quoting their own generals, what [Gen. David] Shoup said, and what [Gen. James] Gavin said. You know, Johnson--sure he listened to generals. There were half-a-million American troops over there. That's what you have West Point for so you have generals to give you advice about military things. So he listened--or consulted with--I don't know, listened--of course, he spoke to generals. But they didn't give him the credit that he was honestly searching for what the best possible course for the country was. They went to labels--"He's a hawk--Johnson is a hawk," which is, when you consider the options available to this man during that time, pretty absurd. Because hawks wanted to blow up the harbor in Haiphong and wanted to hit--you know, do civilian bombing of Hanoi and blow the dikes and all this kind of stuff. There were many, many options. He managed to keep this war within, almost miraculously, as a very limited war--a very tedious war, a very tragic one domestically because it was so hard to sustain against the objectives to it.

And these for the most part were the academic community that for

so long we had felt--many people in America had felt--that, God, if you could only get some academic people in the government! These were people who were trained to think rationally and give a pro and a con and come to a reasonable solution. And starting with Stevenson and Kennedy and Johnson, I think probably more than any, they brought down academics into government such as they've never been in before. And then they went back--not necessarily the same people--but then the academic community got an issue, this Vietnam issue. And again, this is unfair to say the academic community. I'm talking about the liberal dovish academy. You know, as John Roche used to describe them, the people who organized into groups called microbiologists for peace and freedom in Vietnam, you know, that kind of thing. And the methodology of their attack on Johnson was as crude and as unacademic as anything that might come from a racist, redneck politician from the South. No better!

B: Does this kind of thing create frustrations on the staff?

W: Yes, sir, it sure does. It drives you up the wall.

B: I mean, it's more than just a sense of things undone--it's a direct personal frustration?

W: Oh, yes. I think maybe one of the best speeches that I've written down here was Lincoln's birthday speech in '68. This was a speech given on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Lincoln's birthday. Roche was supposed to write it and couldn't write it and he asked me would I do a draft for him, which I did. It was used just about as I wrote it, which attempted to take Lincoln and his period of time, the Civil War, and what America has stood for, what Lincoln stood for, what America has stood for in the time since Lincoln,

throughout the world and attempt sort of loosely to relate it to what was going on in Vietnam, that there was a relationship; that this was in an American tradition. And I think if you read this speech--I've reread it--it makes a good case. It's a reasonable thing, and it was delivered--again, let me stress--on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in honor of Lincoln's birthday.

This was reported by the press. You know, Huntley-Brinkley ran it; Cronkite ran it; it got very good coverage on television, straight. The columns that came out about it the day after and two days after and a week later, it was hard to believe. It was Johnson compares himself to Lincoln. Here was a reasonable, rational, and I thought a damned good speech, that really attempted to place what was happening in Vietnam in some kind of an American continuum. I think it made the case, and I even thought pretty eloquently, if I must say so myself. I know Max Lerner wrote a piece about it where he called it one of Johnson's most eloquent speeches. But for the most part--Mary McGrory [columnist] did a piece and some of the liberal columnists did a piece, that here was Johnson comparing himself to Lincoln. That's all they saw in that speech! Johnson has a Lincoln complex.

B: Were there any special offenders in the press in this regard?

W: Yes, almost all of the columnists, it seems to me. Somehow the columnists divided. There were a few who were for him and were so much for him that they lost their credibility.

B: People like William S. White?

W: William S. White; Joe Alsop on Vietnam, but not domestically; Drew Pearson domestically, but not on Vietnam. There were lines drawn.

White is the classic example, I think. Then there were a bunch of other guys who were just adamantly against him--you know, Joe Kraft and other guys. It ultimately grew to include guys like [Tom] Wicker and [James] Reston [both of New York Times], where they would talk about. . .You read Wicker's stuff now, and Reston's stuff now, you know, where they without qualifying, without saying. . .they talk about Lyndon Johnson's blunders, you know, and how he has destroyed certain things in America. Somehow I think part of it, they never--and as a writer I know if I would write that I hope if I would be writing that about a subsequent president, I'd, you know, hedge it to say he did things which I think were blunders, or which history may show were blunders. These guys don't write that way--these columnists. They talk about Lyndon Johnson's blunders as if everybody has accepted it. This is a blundering man who has led America into a war that we've got no business in. It's really a civil war; and they've got--And you know, that we should have been in enclaves and we should have done this and we should have done that. And they don't say that these were strategic alternatives, that they were options, that you had to go one way or the other. They read it that these were Lyndon Johnson's blunders, and they don't qualify. They just write about it as if it is so and gradually this sort of becomes part of the fabric.

B: Do people here on staff always suffer in silence at that, or do you ever go out and have lunch with one of the columnists and tell them--?

W: Well, yes, and this is where you get into this thing that I was talking about before. No, I've sat down with a number of people who write this kind of stuff, and have told them that in my opinion. . .

And when you sit down with some of these people who talk this way and write this way, I think being a reasonably articulate guy that I can make a lot of headway with them. I have found, you know, the funniest thing, again, about the academic community. You could go out to talk to college kids, and I've done it on occasion and I know a number of people here who have. Normally when you debate something and you argue something, everybody ends up thinking what they thought in the beginning. You really don't make much headway. It reached the stage that in the academic community among the college kids, college teachers, that there was so little of our side of the story coming through that you could actually go up there and talk to some college kids, if you were relatively credible and aware of what their preconceived prejudices were and could sort of apologize in advance for them and establish some credibility that you were just a mere fink who works for the Establishment and who drinks napalm for breakfast, that you could make an astonishing degree of headway just by pointing out certain facts that they weren't aware of. It reached the state where there wasn't a Vietnam debate within the academic community. It just wasn't a debate. It was a series of people saying the same things over and over again, never being contradicted.

B: Did you go out and make that kind of talk on your own, or was it concerted policy here from the staff?

W: No, it was not concerted policy on the staff, and I didn't do it more than maybe two or three times on occasions that just sort of came up.

B: Does this have anything to do with these trips that Cater and McPherson made around the academic community?

W: No. That was something else where they were out seeking--they weren't out arguing with them.

B: They were mostly out after domestic ideas.

W: Ideas, yes. The State Department, I gathered, had almost a speakers' bureau, sending people out--I don't know how effective the people were, they were not White House staff people; White House staff people were not encouraged to do this. But as I say, I'd done some of it with people who you'd have lunch with or who could call you or something like that, press people, and found that I could make some reasonable headway, you know--less with a journalist than with a college student obviously. And the feeling you got was that it was helping the President. So then you've got to weigh that off against the fact that in certain instances the President doesn't--his general feeling is to clam up with the press. Yet you know that in certain instances, you're helping him; and you're not getting quoted by name or by White House source or anything else, which would--so, you've got to kind of weigh that off as to whether there's a journalist that you know, who you have some credibility with. You know, and my feeling, again, you've got to make these judgments on your own ultimately. If they want a press report on it, give them a press report on it for the most part. As I say, this has been honored in a breach in many instances because I know I always felt unhappy about the idea of having had a conversation with a press guy, of having said that I had a conversation with so-and-so, and if there were a reason that I didn't want it, would not

necessarily send that up, you know.

B: How much impact did the President's withdrawal from the campaign have on this situation?

W: Oh, I think it turned around then.

B: You used the phrase earlier--patronizing the President since then.

W: It's sort of funny the way that they've reacted to this thing. They sort of give him credit for so little, you know. He got out of the race, he stopped the bombing, and then Hanoi accepted; and all of a sudden, he was a great statesman, it was a great heroic political kind of a thing. And that lasted, I don't know--ten days, two weeks; and then they started throwing up in his face--"You said you'd go any time, any place, and now they want to meet you in Phnom Penh or Warsaw or something like that, you won't go." He was automatically a liar and a son-of-a-bitch and everything else. You know, I didn't deal substantively with Vietnam at all. I had very little to do with the rhetoric on Vietnam. It was mostly doing domestic things. Occasionally some stuff that got into Vietnam, but not very frequently. And I was never really pleased with our Vietnam rhetoric. I think the President you know, made some--in other words, some of his Vietnam speeches, I think, were really unfortunate. In other words, the stuff where he went out saying, "We've got to stick it out in Vietnam because we've got to stick up for the troops--our boys over there." That really is illogical fallacy. In other words, even the idiot doves were not saying that we don't have to support our boys. What they were saying was, "Sure, let's support our boys and save their lives by getting them out of there." So he occasionally wrapped himself in the flag on that kind of thing which I think was

a stupid tack to take.

B: Where lies the stupidity--in the speech writing, or in the President's view, or can you separate the two?

W: I don't know. That kind of stuff didn't appear in the stuff that I wrote about Vietnam.

B: Do speech writers get a chance to advise on that? Take you, for example. If you were asked to write a speech about Vietnam, if you got the idea that it was to be a flag-waving type speech, do you have any opportunity to say, "Now look, it would be better to approach it from this angle."?

W: I would just write it that way. I'd write it the way I thought it ought to be written for the most part. For awhile around here, people would say, "how do speeches get written--what's the process." And I'd say, "It has never been the same twice." After awhile it kind of ultimately got in to be that you might define it as a process, although even then there was a lot of difference on each individual speech.

B: To ask that another way, if a speech is wanted and a certain line is wanted, is it assigned to someone whom it is known will generally take that line?

W: Maybe. I don't know. The Vietnam speeches, I guess, were probably done--Harry Middleton did a lot of them. McPherson did the big ones, I know. Middleton, I think, did a lot of these Medal of Honor things. McPherson's were usually pretty good; Middleton's were all right; Sparks did some of the Medal of Honor things, which were really silly--which got us into a lot of trouble because they went into this kind of--

B: You're referring to these award ceremonies?

W: Yes. I was never pleased with the. . .Again, even the sensible things he said in those, and most of it was sensible--there were certain parts of it that I didn't like and a lot of it, in fairness to the speech writers, some of it was Johnson's where he would go off the text and talk on his own. There were occasions when he did this when he was extremely effective. You know he did that press conference at the end of '67--public press conference--where he spoke about Vietnam, where he was very, very effective.

B: That's the one where he had the throat microphone and could move away from the lectern.

W: Yes, right. And he was very effective about it then. There were other times when he got, I thought, a little flag-wavy about it and was hurting himself within the people. It probably rang a responsive chord among the majority of Americans, which is probably why he was doing it. But it intensified the opposition amongst the people who were actively opposing him. So this is a trade-off he probably had to figure in his mind and probably went one way instead of the other way. And I don't know where the wisdom lies in it. It seems to me it was not presented at that time as good as it could have been.

B: Who assigns the speeches?

W: We ought to go back to where we were, and we can pick that up which was in the fall of '66. Anyway, after awhile, Moyers--we're now in the fall of '66 the speeches then were theoretically being assigned out of Kintner's office, I guess. And they hired on in addition to Sparks and Hardesty two or three other guys--Jack McNulty; Bill Schoen who was with Ford Motor Co. McNulty had been

with Rockefeller. Bill Schoen never proved valuable and went back to Ford after the campaign, as I recall. And they had over a guy from HEW named Walter Coyne. So there were ultimately five guys in that unit there.

Then Bill got just completely snowed under. He was really running the whole operation, and it was decided that Cater would then be the point man on the speeches, doing what Bill had been [doing]. Then Bill at that time suggested that I, because this was what I was doing, work with Cater on it. So I remained sort of for record-keeping purposes on Moyers' staff. Then this was sort of toward, oh, I guess the end of September, beginning of October. But I was working with Cater doing the same kind of thing. The speeches would come in and we'd edit them and rewrite them and stuff, but was still doing some work, other kinds of work, with Moyers. And I worked with Cater and Ervin Duggan on these speeches and did a couple of political speeches.

There was one speech in particular. The President went up to Newark, New Jersey, and gave a real political stem-winder which I wrote and Cater did some editing on. We took it up to the President the night before about 11. This is a funny kind of an incident. Took it up about 11--Cater was going to take it up. The President said he wanted to see the speech, and Cater asked me did I want to come along. I said sure, you know.

Cater went in and I went in with him, and we gave the speech to the President. This was at 11 o'clock at night, and he was sort of watching the three news broadcases on that flicker that he has

there. And he kind of read this speech. He didn't say a word. He grunted a little [simulates grunt]. We sat there for about ten minutes while he read the speech, and he handed it back to Doug [grunt] like that. I walked out and I was just crushed. This was the first time I had actually been there when the President was reading a speech that I had written. I mentioned it to Doug, I said, "God, I guess he didn't like it!" And he said, "Don't be silly, that's the best reaction I've seen him give on a speech." It turned out that he then gave the speech and we then had a meeting. At that time we were having some speech writers' meetings where he met with us three or four times, three times, the President with the speech writers. I guess there were eight or nine people who were involved in the whole thing, maybe ten: McPherson, Cater, myself, Ervin Duggan, and five or so from that other group with Kintner and Fred Panzer, who I guess was doing some research on this stuff, and Maguire. And he said--well, this was shortly thereafter--"Ben, you wrote that Newark speech, didn't you?" I didn't quite know what was coming next, but I said, "Yes, sir, I did." And he said, "Well, that was the best political speech that I've ever seen in my life. That was the best speech that I've ever seen in my whole life--best political speech!" That was a great moment.

So I prepared these speeches, and I was working with Cater. And as I say, this was the last time, I think, that the President really went out on trips where it was announced in advance that he was going to make a trip--made three or four or five or six appearances over a weekend or over two or three days.

B: Where are we in time now? The Newark speech was in the fall of '66?

W: Yes, this is all in the fall of '66; the Newark speech was probably late September or early October or something like that.

Then the Asia trip came up and this is really a funny sequence of events. We're going to run out of time. But anyway.

B: I could come back any time. We can keep going until you run out of time.

W: I'll keep going until 12:30 if you want to. I've got a lunch date then; however you want to do it. In any event, one day, zap, it came over that the President was going to take this Asian trip--seventeen days, six nations, Manila Summit Conference. Bill Moyers regarded this as kind of--Bill says that this was his idea, the whole thing; and he was sort of the major domo on the whole trip, advancing it and speeches and the substance of it and everything else. He had been talking ever since the day I got here, been talking of leaving. He was talking about being president of Hamilton College, and he was talking about the Newsday thing, and he was talking about a number of things. And this was sort of going to be his piéce de resistance, the last; and it was the first time Johnson traveled overseas internationally. And McPherson and Bill and Roche went out and did an advance prior to it.

B: They went out on the trip route?

W: On the trip route, yes. And I asked Bill at that time, I said, "Shall I take my shots and stuff," would I be going? And he said, "Well, take your shots. I don't know. We'll see. Do you want to go?" And I said, "Yes, I'd like to go." He said, "Well, we'll see."

It wasn't planned that I was going to go.

And in the meanwhile, the thing is we saw speeches, either when I was working with Moyers or Cater--we saw the speeches last, and then frequently rewrote the whole damned thing. When they were out on the advance, the State Department had been given the route and the speech schedule, and wrote up drafts for each speech, which then went into this Kintner-Maguire-Schoen-McNulty-Hardesty-Sparks complex; and they either rewrote them or submitted alternate drafts. Then they were compiled in a big book by Cater. Stuff that comes over from the State Department--speeches--are usually so absurdly bad that as a writer, it's just incredible. I suspect that after awhile they really give up trying because they see. I know that when I get in toasts and arrival statements for foreign heads of state, I sometimes just end up tossing them in the waste paper basket. and just starting fresh, or working with our guys here in the National Security Council. I guess the process on that one would have been for the State Department to Rostow's people to the Kintner people, and then it went into a big book in Cater's room, awaiting Moyers' return. And I got a look at this book. Bill had told me to take a look at it when this stuff comes in, and Cater had it, and we were working on some other speeches for the President. Then I guess the day before Moyers came back I finally got a look at this book of speeches. There must have been probably twenty speeches scheduled for that trip. They were just terrible, they were just terrible! And they were just unusable! And they made the President look like a jackass. They were the kinds of things where he would go to Thailand or to the Philippines, or something like that and say,

"You people are to be commended because you've lowered your trichinosis tate, and your yams and casava crops are doing wonderfully this year."

Tape 2 of 2

B: You were talking about the prepared speeches for the Asian trip.

W: Oh, yes, for the Asian trip. They were justifying the President's Vietnam policy in each stop, which I guess was all right, but doing it in rhetoric that was not particularly sound, I didn't think. Was talking about each of these countries and how wonderfully they were doing. You know, "Oughtn't we be so proud of them." They played over Rostow's favorite themes of regionalism and multilateralism to a point that it could drive you just out of your mind. They just weren't interesting speeches mostly.

B: Incidentally, did you have a contingency speech for a trip to Vietnam. At the time I recall it was rumored that he would go to Vietnam.

W: No, I think that was written later. We'll get into that. That was a funny story also as the way that thing. . . I don't know how it was ultimately written, but I'll tell you about that in a minute.

In any event, I read this, and I wrote a memo to Moyers about it. I said, "I've had a chance to read these speeches. They're terrible. The equivalent would be if the President of the Philippines came to North Georgia and said, 'Isn't it wonderful what you people have done with the trichinosis rate in northern Georgia here, and you're growing good cotton crops, and we're all proud of you. This kind of crap was all right for Rostow or anybody else to talk about, McNamara, if that's what he wanted to talk about. But the one thing the President wasn't talking about was the one thing that he really is an expert on, and that is America. He wasn't talking about America. And that was at least

half of this trip. Half of this trip was Asia, and half of this trip was America, and sort of a relationship." So I pointed these two things out to Moyers, saying the thing was terrible, why it was terrible, what he ought to be talking about.

At that time I still didn't know if I was going or not going. Moyers came back and was immediately closed in the situation room, and I was really sort of afraid to go in and see him because it was all high-level, big mucky-muck kind of stuff. I sent him this memo. This was probably on a Saturday. I had taken most of my shots, but I didn't know if I was going yet. Moyers sent it in to the President with I guess probably a little note saying, "I agree," and just sent it in to the President. And I guess the President agreed wholeheartedly, as it turned out. He said, "Yes, Wattenberg ought to go on this trip.." I guess Bill probably sent it in with this note saying, "Wattenberg ought to go on this trip," or something like that. And this immediate reaction was, "Yes, Wattenberg ought to go on the trip," because this was sound and these speeches were going to have to be rewritten while we were out there.

Then his next reaction was sort of a funny one. It was if one speech writer could have this good idea and say that this stuff was junk and we would have to rewrite them and we're going to take the one speech writer along, then we ought to take the other four also. What one speech writer could do four speech writers could do four times better.

So I at least had some inkling through Bill that I might be going on this trip. These other four guys--that was Sparks, Hardesy,

Schoen, McNulty, and we left on a Monday morning. They didn't hear that they were going to go on this trip until Saturday night. I don't think they know it to this day that it was a result of my memo. It might not have been that. I think that's pretty well how it came up.

Then there was a meeting called that Moyers and I, and Kintner, and those four guys were supposed to meet together. Because of an accident--Moyers thought it was on Saturday and Kintner thought it was on Sunday, or something like that--it never came off. But the plan that the President had was that we were going to go, there was going to be five speech writers, and if we made public appearance, you know, as speech writers, it was going to look kind of silly, and the press would say, "Yes, the President traveling with five speech writers," you know. So his plan was that we would travel on the backup plane, not on Air Force One and not sleep at the regular hotels, but sleep like on military bases or something like that. Just stay kind of secretly hidden. This was the purpose of this meeting--to lay out the rules for these guys. I told Moyers, "Look, I want to go on this trip, but I'll be Goddamned if I'm going that way. I would just be of no use. I can stay back here--" In fact, I have a memo that I gave him saying, "There are three other things I could be doing back here very profitably, but I'll be Goddamned if I'm going to go on a trip that when you're in Bangkok or Hawaii or Manila, I'm going to be out at Clark Air Force Base in some barracks."

B: There's another example of unnecessary secretiveness. You couldn't have stayed hidden anyway.

W: Well, I don't know. You probably could have. It's a funny kind of thing; I'll tell you what happened. This was the original plan. So I immediately told Moyers, "If that's the way I'm going, take me out. I don't want to go that way. I don't care about the other four guys. They can do anything in the hell they want to do. That's your problem or Kintner's problem or the President's problem. Take me along, instead of as a speech writer, take me along formally as--" After all I was on his staff, the press guys knew I was on his staff, I said, "You're going to have a lot of press work," I guess they had four men in the press office,"I'll kind of be the fifth man. I'll help out with the news releases or ferrying them around on the press buses over there. That would be my ostensible cover if I needed a cover."

So I don't even think he asked the President. I just did it. And I flew out there on the first leg of the trip with George Christian on one of the press planes as a press aide, and that was it.

B: What did the other four guys do?

W: Well, the other guys went out on the backup plane. Again, the President kind of calmed down. That might have been just his first reaction--you know, hide them. They went along on the backup plane, and they were never really questioned because they weren't traveling in the top echelon. These were guys who were very new here, even newer than I, and guys who the press for the most part did not know. I don't think we ever really had those kinds of stories come out.

Anyway, we went out there. And McPherson was sort of by that time or on that trip the point man on the speeches, riding herd over these

five guys who went out there. There were really too many speech writers. It was absurd. Around here we needed that many speech writers because he was giving a lot of speeches and everybody was doing a lot of other things also. But out there, one or two or three guys certainly could have handled it, because, you know, that's all you were doing.

We got out to Hawaii, which was just an overnight, and then we flew into New Zealand the next day. I remember writing the arrival statement for the President in New Zealand. I guess Harry asked me to take a crack at it; ending up doing the arrival statement in New Zealand actually on the plane coming into--we landed at North Island, and then flew in I guess.

B: Was McPherson on the trip, too?

W: Yes, McPherson was on the trip. These other guys flew on the backup plane, and I sort of ended up writing a number of the speeches--many of them. There was displeasure on McPherson's and Moyers' part, I think, on the work that these other guys were turning out. And they were very resentful of McPherson because they said he wasn't paying attention to what they were writing, or he wasn't asking them to write anything, or he wanted all the glory for--some junk like that. In McPherson's instance I know it wasn't true.

In any event, I started writing some of these speeches and ended up kind of sometimes traveling on Air Force One with the President, and sometimes on the backup plane. The first leg was on the press plane, and then sort of alternating back and forth; and wrote the New Zealand arrival. Then we got to Australia, and I did--again, the night before as I recall it, worked until 3 o'clock

in the morning. You know, there was a draft. He was talking to--I think we were three days in Australia, and that was the day he was going to go up to Sydney. There was a speech at an art gallery there in Sydney. It was a dreadful speech, again--the draft that we were working with. And I sat down that night and wrote a big speech, and again, one that I liked very much. As it turned out, Moyers liked it a lot and McPherson liked it a lot. It sort of was playing to the domestic press in this instance, outlining the kinds of things that the President was looking forward to when he came back to America--talking about two big civilized nations, Australia and the United States, as to what were the kinds of things that we ought to be looking forward to; what was going to be embodied in his next year's program. And Moyers backgrounded this to a few people, and I've got some clippings on it, that this was the President's sort of tip-off on what the State of the Union was going to be about. And it spoke about the quality of life in America rather than the quantities and things like that. It was a good speech. I did that one, and then--

B: Let me make that clear. Moyers deliberately tipped off the press?

W: Yes, this was at my suggestion. I mean, this is not a--that's the wrong way of phrasing it, deliberately tipped off. I mean, this is a press secretary's job, is to get--In other words, you could write that speech--and it was pretty well what some of the thinking was going on about what that State of the Union message ought to be. It wasn't a phony tip. And it was a theme that the Johnson Administration had sounded before and was indeed to sound again.

B: That was my next question. This wasn't any spur of the moment thing,

this prelude to the State of the Union. The thinking had been going on--?

W: Well, yes. I know this is the direction my thoughts were going in--and a number of other people. It was nothing so greatly revealing or anything, but it was a theme that had been sounded again and again.

When I mentioned it to Moyers--you know you're always looking when you're writing a speech if you're doing your job as to what's the news lead in it, and what's the lead in it for columnists to write something on it, because otherwise you get very little coverage on it. And I suggested to Bill that maybe he would want to background it to a few people and say, "This is the kind of thought that is going on about the State of the Union Message." And he did this. I know he did it with Dick Wilson, the columnist, who then used it both from there and subsequently referred to it a couple of times later on.

And then this thing with these other writers and McPherson and the way it was working out, it was not working out well at all. We got to Manila--we went to New Zealand and Australia--and we were working very hard. I was, anyway; and then got to Manila. There was sort of the whole substantive section of that trip. Really I and the rest of the writers had nothing to do with these were negotiations with [Nguyen Van] Thieu and [Nguyen Cao] Ky and [Ferdinand E.] Marcos and all those other people. Although we went out to a couple of the parties--that last, a farewell party at the Malacanun Palace in Manila.

On the Vietnam trip--that was the one leg that I didn't take on this thing. The President was scheduled to go to Corregidor to

lay a wreath or something, and I went out. They called the special press conference at the American Embasy that I kind of wandered into. This was this big security press conference where they later then loaded everybody on the plane and sent them out. And I just sort of wandered in because I had access to these things. Bob Fleming said, "Were you invited to this thing?" And I said, "No, I just thought I'd sit in; you know, I always come in and listen to the press conference." He said, "Well, this one, they've counted everybody." So I walked out.

B: That must have been a sure tip-off to you as to what--

W: Well, I kind of had a little feeling of it, but I was still new on the staff and I wasn't going to challenge anybody on anything.

So I went out to Corregidor where he was going to make this speech on a Philippine Navy launch where they were taking out part of the press, the press that didn't go to this thing and weren't shunted off to the airport to wait for the Vietnam thing. About half did. We split up about half and half. So I went with the other half of the press.

And it turned out that while I was on--the other speech writers I gather didn't even go on to Corregidor. They just stayed around their hotel rooms.

Then the President decided definitely he was going to go to Vietnam, and I gather there wasn't a speech ready. This is my feeling. And from what I understood, Valenti was then on the trip, so they called those four writers and they went along on this trip. And as I heard it--and they tried to get McPherson, and McPherson was busy writing a speech for the next [time]--something

for the next thing, and thought it was just some Mickey Mouse call from somebody and didn't take the call, or wasn't paged, or something like that. And McPherson didn't go. And they ended up writing the speech, as I heard, a very short speech to the troops there--that Valenti sat these four guys down and said, "You write paragraph one; you write paragraph two; you write paragraph three.", which when I heard it then, it was the most absurd thing I've ever heard of in my life. And I guess Valenti then kind of fused them all together, and Moyers was on the plane, and he probably added to it. I don't know whose speech it was. I don't remember the speech. And they came back--And I didn't go. I was sort of crestfallen really, because then you could at least say, "Well, I was in Vietnam, you know.

So I missed that leg because I was on this damned boat when, I gather, the calls went out. I assume I would have been called, and they probably couldn't reach me. But anyway, McPherson wasn't reached, and I gather that the President then on his way back sent word that McPherson should meet the plane. Apparently McPherson came on board--you know, they called him onboard, and he [the President] chewed out McPherson in front of all these other guys which he has been known to do, I guess--he has never done it to me, I don't think, not when I've been there, anyway--and was just madder than hell because McPherson had missed this trip to Vietnam.

B: Was that because he had been unavailable?

W: Yes, apparently. Then he said that on the second leg of the trip, McPherson and these other writers--I don't know me included or not. I think probably all the writers should go home, you know, go home

on Rusk's plane from Manila, and he would go on. Well, Moyers interceded for McPherson, and of course, you know the President loves McPherson. And McPherson is a very, very able guy, extremely capable in many ways. So McPherson ended up staying, and I ended up staying; and these other four guys were sent back.

This is the other credibility problem. They came back to do the speeches for this trip that never came off--you know, the last four days where he was going to go to Memphis and California and Boston and everywhere else. Then it turned out that he had these two little operations, the throat nodule and the scar from the gall bladder operation, I guess, or whatever it was. But they were actually coming back to prepare the speeches. People say, "Well, isn't this evidence that he really did plan the trip and then he lied at this press conference where he said 'no, I didn't have any plans.'"

(interruption)

The four speech writers were sent back and were writing this thing--oh, I was saying then later at this press conference of course the President said, "Who, me! I never had any plans to make these political speeches." And that was another so-called example of the credibility gap, deviousness, and all that kind of stuff; because you know, there were people making banners all over America, and there were speeches being written and everything else. I don't know--that hangs on a word. Did he have plans? He surely had contingency plans. But Johnson doesn't work that way. You know there have been many other times that we've had speeches all written, and he hasn't gone for one reason or another. So in his

mind, whether or not there were plans or not, you know, firm plans with a capital P, that he was going to do this, whoever knows! Apparently it was, from what I've heard since from both the President and other people, Moyers and Carol Welch, who was Moyers' secretary you know, let the press know that this was the general plan.

B: Before you get too far away from it, were the reporters who were left back there on Corregidor unhappy when they found out?

W: No, it was split up in such a way, as I recall it--they could only take one press plane, I think, and I think these people on Corregidor were split up in such a way that, in other words, like if the New York Times had two people covering, one went to Corregidor and one went to--If the AP had three people, if USIA had four people, two or three went to Corregidor--I think one representative of each media, of each paper, went on the Vietnam leg. That's as I recall it.

In any event, then we went on to Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur--where else did we go--Seoul, Alaska, and home. I guess that's it. Did I miss something?

B: Isn't that the trip that went by around Rome?

W: No, that was the next year; that was the next year. It's interesting. When I heard that the President was going on this trip, I sent Moyers a memo with a bunch of different ideas that might be combined. One of them was that on the way back, instead of coming back the way we ultimately came back, was that he ought to go back by Rome and see the Pope. And Moyers said, "Yes, that was an interesting idea," and that's the last I heard of it.

Then when we were in Bangkok, we had dinner one night at a Danish

restaurant in Bangkok, which is sort of an interesting combination, but it's supposedly the best restaurant there. Moyers and Valenti and McPherson and myself and Hal Pachios, who was on Moyers' staff, and a couple of the secretaries who were on Moyers' staff, as I recall it. We were sitting around there, and Moyers sort of says in a pregnant pause in the conversation, "What do you think about the idea of the President going back the other way and stopping off and seeing the Pope." And Valenti had just been in Rome apparently; he had started in on this motion picture association job relevantly recently and had been visiting with Sophia Loren and his movie friends in Rome. So he immediately snapped at this thing: "Wow, I know just the right people at the Vatican, and I can set this up; and that's a great idea--terrific," and everything else. Then he kind of dropped it, and we didn't go back by Rome.

Of course the next year on this 'round-the-world trip when he went to [Prime Minister of Australia Harold] Holt's funeral, he did come back by Rome; and it was indeed Valenti who was on that trip. Moyers, of course, was long since gone. I don't know how it came about, but in any event--

So we went on in Bangkok, and I found myself doing--at least from my lights, I don't know, you'll probably hear it otherwise from other people--but I found myself writing a lot of the speeches, or many of them. I did the key one. I guess on the whole trip I think I ended up by doing six speeches, I think, in the course of seventeen days. It was a lot of speeches. A few big ones and a few of them not such big ones. Anyway, I wrote the big speech in Thailand which was at Tchulalon Korn University. And by this time I had

learned what was going on, as to how to do this. As soon as we got in, I think on a Monday afternoon, when everybody else was unpacking, I immediately got a USIA guy, a Thai, a young student who had been a student at Tchulalon Korn, who took me out to the university that afternoon and spoke to students and spoke to some faculty and saw the university; because I knew the speech wasn't much good, and he was delivering it on a Wednesday or something, and I had this feeling that I was going to be asked to do it. And sure enough, that Tuesday morning--the speech was scheduled for Wednesday morning--we were up in Moyers' suite there, and I guess Rostow had done a draft of a speech. This was, again, not the original State Department draft, not a draft that had come in in this big book, but this was a new draft, I think, that Rostow had done. But I don't think that Moyers and McPherson either were particularly pleased with it, and they asked me to do a draft. I went into a sort of little side room in this suite and sat down for about four hours. I had had an idea for a speech I guess that I might have mentioned to them about dealing with comparative cultures, the kind of thing which I thought was oriental and western, that sort of thing. I didn't know much about it; but this guy I went out with to Tchulalon Korn University, we got into a long discussion about Buddhism and Christianity and all that kind of thing. And in about four hours [I] wrote out a draft of the speech. I remember Bill Bundy was there, and ultimately liked the speech very much and was impressed with it. And Bill [Moyers] liked it; McPherson liked it.

They then had two drafts, my draft and Rostow's draft. By mid-afternoon I guess the President was calling for it. It was being

typed up and everything else. Then Moyers sent McPherson and I over to the President. This is sort of an example of the kind of important power that Moyers wielded. There were two speech drafts. There was Rostow's speech and Wattenberg's speech. I think that both Moyers and McPherson felt that my speech was more appropriate. The President, as I understand it, does not like the idea of getting two speech drafts. That's why he has got a staff to see that he gets the distilled wisdom. He was not in the kind of mood to give Rostow's kind of speech. He had thrown into the wastepaper basket a few of Rostow's speeches on this trip already, because they dealt in these great polemical phrases like multilateral, regional development. You know, just the kind of things that he didn't want to be talking about because they got so obtruse and so technical.

So Moyers gave McPherson the instruction to show him Wattenberg's speech, and I guess McPherson said, "Should I show him both." And he said, "No, just show him Wattenberg's speech; if he doesn't like it, then you can have the other one there."

So we went up to the Palace of the King of Siam, which is about what it sounds like. The story that ultimately came out on that--I guess it ran in Time Magazine or something--was that apparently Johnson was staying in one of the wings of this palace. It's the most sumptuous, plushest place you would ever imagine. It's an Oriental Potentate's palace. Apparently their breakfast was brought in by servants crawling on their bellies, as they do to their own King, you know. And the apocryphal I'm sure kind of was, "This is my kind of place!" But anyway, it was really that kind of a great palace.

So we went up there, and the President was taking a nap. Then we waited until he got ready; and McPherson gave him this speech. He read it, and I noticed that he didn't say much. Mrs. Johnson came in there. They were getting dressed to go down at 8 o'clock and meet the King downstairs; and Mrs. Johnson came in dressed beautifully. His studs were being put on him and stuff. And she said, "We have to hurry up because we have to meet them at 8 o'clock sharp." And he sort of grunted. And then she came in about two minutes later, he was still reading this speech and making some comments that McPherson was writing down--you know, some stuff to add in that he wanted to mention. She said, "Dear, we have to hurry up; we've got to be there at 8 o'clock." And he sort of grunted. Then she came in the third time and said, "We really--it's just two minutes to eight; we have to go out there, because it's terrible if we're late." And he kind of looked up and he said, "What are they going to do about it," or something like that, which is really a great commentary on the relationship of American Presidents to Kings of places like Thailand. He later was talking to us and he said, "As I was telling this little King just the other day," that kind of thing; and it's funny. You know, these are all private comments, and he was very good about it on this whole trip; and it was commented upon that he always did defer to these people. Because, you know, the critics' statements about this trip were that--you know, Fulbright's statement was that he was going to visit "our" boys. You know, these were all client states. So as the press reported, he went out of his way to defer to them. But it sort of was an interesting kind of thing.

Anyway, he was giving McPherson and me kind of comments over his shoulder as we were walking down this staircase, you know, actually meeting the King. He and Mrs. Johnson were all dressed in formal, and the King and the Queen down at the bottom there; and I was just dressed in a Filipino sport shirt. We had just run over with this thing, I guess McPherson had a suit on. And we were going down this curling staircase, and he was kind of calling over his shoulder, "And be sure to put in something about such-and-such." It was a very funny scene.

B: Before you leave that, does that kind of thing cause any intramural resentment, that your speech was accepted over Rostow's?

W: Sure, it does. On that one--I guess Rostow ultimately saw the speech draft, and he said, "Did the President see mine?" or something like that. And I guess that either Moyers or Harry said, "Yes, oh, sure," or something like that. But it was in front of other people. They might have told him later that it wasn't. It's a very difficult role. In that instance, Moyers made the decision and I think the right one. Knowing the two speeches and what the President was after, I'm sure had the President seen the two, he would have gone for mine because of the nature of what--

B: It never put you in an uncomfortable position in relationship to people like Rostow or--?

W: Well, with Rostow, it's sort of dealing on a wholly different level. He's way up in the stratosphere there and sees the President every day, and I'm obviously not anywheres near that. But it puts you in a particularly difficult relationship in dealing with your colleagues' work. In other words, when I was in the position--which I wasn't after

awhile--of working on speeches that Hardesty and Sparks and McNulty and Schoen were writing that were coming up either through Moyers or through Cater, who was not generally pleased with the speeches, and Moyers wasn't pleased with it, the President wasn't pleased with it, and was in the position of having to rewrite them and whack them up and delete things. It was in a very uncomfortable position. Moyers' general instruction to me was "Just be cordial and courteous, and just stay away from them. Don't get involved. You'll get it up through me, and then I'll ask you to do it, but don't get into any wrestling matches with them directly," which I didn't. You know, we were cordial to each other, but they knew that their stuff was not coming out the way they wrote it.

You know, subsequently to that when I was on the other end of the stick when it worked out that I was writing things that were then going up through, like Maguire and McPherson--although McPherson has a pretty good touch on his stuff and almost invariably improves a speech. I found him a pretty good editor. Maguire sometime had a heavy hand and added stuff.

But Maguire's role recently has been sort of a funny one. Orginally I think he was supposed to be the traffic man on the speeches. At some point or other--and he's a funny kind of a writer, some of the stuff that he writes is pretty good, and some of it is I think vastly overwritten. I guess at one point or another the President said, "Well, you go through everything and make it so that it's in my language," kind of thing. Sometimes he has added in things and taken out things that I haven't always been in agreement with. McPherson generally had the mandate that substantively Maguire

was to do the typing and seeing that it went back and forth, and that the assignments--that everybody was getting them in on time; and McPherson would do the editing of the draft itself before it went to the--but Maguire also did a little bit of it.

B: Did you have the opportunity to--?

W: After it's edited.

B: --get together with Maguire in the editing process, after the editing.

W: Maguire wasn't the man, McPherson would be the guy to do it. The way the thing worked, the answer generally was no. In other words, I'd send up a speech and Maguire would see that McPherson got it. McPherson would edit it; and then theoretically you didn't see it. But I would then see it after McPherson sent it down to Maguire's office, because I'd go down and just see that the girls were typing on it, and I'd ask to see it and I was never denied to see it. Most of the time--you know, 95 percent of the time, 90 percent of the time--I'd find out that what he did was okay. There were a couple of times when I didn't like what he did for one reason or another and went up and bitched to him about it, and said, "I don't think you ought to have done that." And he either changed it or he didn't change it. He was pretty good about it.

I kind of felt that McPherson didn't run that speech thing properly in only one real way. He didn't take a--at least I didn't feel--the assignments of the speeches came to be just sort of haphazard. You know, who wanted to do such-and-such. Certain guys fell into patterns of writing. One guy wrote about Vietnam, one guy wrote about this, and it kind of came almost the luck of the draw sort of thing, which I think McPherson should have been more

acutely attuned to who can write what stuff well and can't. I don't think he ever really handled that particularly.

B: It was McPherson who was making the assignment by that time?

W: Theoretically I guess it was, but it was actually probably Maguire who was doing it; and seemed to be doing it with no real thought in terms of who can write--that was my feeling. There were times when I knew about a speech that was coming up and said, "I want to write that speech," and was almost always granted it. There were a number of speeches, the more important speeches as far as I was concerned, that I worked on, were ones that never appeared on that shedule. In other words, there were some instances where I'd get--one that I was thinking of that I got word on--Marvin Watson called me. No, I guess what happened was, Maguire got a word from the President through Watson, I guess saying, "The President wants Ben Wattenberg to write this speech on the Jewish labor committee in New York a week from now." They had invited the President to speak at a dinner honoring George Meany--"write a good speech about George Meany." So I write a speech and sent it up right through Marvin Watson, and got it in like three days in advance or something. He wanted to see it to decide whether he was going to it or something other on his schedule. And then Watson called me back and said, "The President wants you to cut 500 words from it, and add in--He doesn't like such-and-such part about Meany," or something like that. And I did it again.

And there were certain speeches--again, the speeches that I was most importantly involved with were outside of this mechanism of assignment. These were sort of the semi-routine things. In other

words, there was a poverty speech I did in February that I had sent up to the President maybe five different memos on, saying that he ought to give a speech, this was what everybody was saying, Johnson's gutting the Great Society; he's killing off OEO. And he wasn't doing any such thing. I mean, they were having a tough time with their budget, as everybody else was in this Vietnam period; but he wasn't doing that. And he hadn't spoken out on poverty, not because he--
So frequently the press interprets these things as, you know, things come up on the speech calendar, and they interpret them as some grand design of what the President is trying--"He's trying to do such-and-such"--when in reality. . .For example, there was one period, it was really funny--this must have been four or five months ago, I guess, three or four months ago--where the President made three speeches on Russia in a single week: one on the Space Treaty; and one on something else; and one on--And all over the world, they were saying, "It's a thaw. The President is out." And it happened that three things came up at the same time. You see, the press's job--they are pattern-makers. They go out and look for patterns, whether the patterns are there or not.

B: Is there someone on the staff who has the job of looking at that speech schedule and seeing if there is a pattern formed?

W: Well, yes and no. But I don't think in those three instances--again, I don't recall them specifically, but they were the kind of things that alternatively if you had not spoken on those instances, it might well have been interpreted as that was a slap in the face or it was the reversal of thoughts. It's kind of funny the way it works out. As I say, their job is to make patterns. The patterns aren't

always there, but they make them anyway. This is part of the press difficulty in America.

B: In this assignment business, if I understand correctly, routine and minor speeches are put up on sort of a weekly schedule, and then--?

W: Not always minor ones; some of the major ones are on a schedule also.

B: But there are some speeches that aren't assigned by the weekly schedule?

W: Yes. And frequently the very important ones. I'm just thinking of a few that I've been involved in--some where the initative was mine as on this poverty thing. I wrote him a memo saying, "You ought to speak on poverty; do you want to speak on poverty." And he said, "Yes." So I drafted this speech, and he said, "Yes." And I drafted a speech and sent it up to him. Like nothing happened. And then I sent up another memo two weeks later saying,"Here are three different occasions when you might want to give this poverty speech." And he said, "Well, we'll think about it for such-and-such." Then there were four or five memos that went up.

Finally on one occasion [Sargent] Shriver--OEO had a group of about 300 women here called the "Women's War on Poverty" or something like that; so Mrs. Johnson I guess invited them to the White House, and then the President took--McPherson and I edited it down, cut it down somewhat because it was designed as a long speech, about 2,500 words. We cut it down to about 1,700 words; McPherson added a little bit on to it. Its basic theme was, "No, we're not cutting back on the war on poverty; we've just begun

to fight" kind of thing. He delivered it--I don't know, something either happened before or after--he didn't deliver it very well, but it got widely quoted all over the country. It said, you know, "We've just begun to fight, and we're not giving up on the war on poverty." And it was the kind of reassurance that the OEO people and people on the Hill who were fighting for it wanted to hear from the President.

B: Is it unusual that you send memos on proposed speech ideas? Do all the speech writers do that?

W: That's something you ought to find out from the other speech writers. I don't think that, for the most part, the other speech writers were doing it. That's why I was never really in--You see, I was sort of in a very--I'm trying to think--there wasn't anybody on the staff doing in exactly the kind of capacity that I was. In other words, there were three or four guys always who were speech writers, and I wasn't one of them, because that was this old Kintner operation. This was Sparks and Hardesty and then Whitney Shoemaker was on it for awhile; and Peter Benchley then came on to the staff when Schoen left. And Harry Middleton was on it. Middleton is an able writer and came on, but he did a lot of work with Califano's people on the messages. He was working closely with Larry Levinson on that stuff. So I always felt that I was in a different kind of relationship, and ultimately was writing memos myself to the President, frequently showing them to Cater or McPherson before I would send them up, almost invariably, not always, but most of the time, so that theoretically I wasn't going around anybody. I would usually try to show it to somebody before I sent it up. But they were going up to the

President from Ben Wattenberg. And they weren't always dealing with speeches, either.

For example, you wanted to know on the political thing. As we got into the campaign or what we thought was going to be campaign, this was the political season.

B: This was looking forward to the Presidential campaign--

W: Yes. This started like in the summer of '67, I think. I suggested to Cater that we have Dick Scammon down here and have a lunch--Cater has got a big table in his office--with Scammon and invite in ten or so of the President's aides, the important--

B: Is Mr. Scammon coming up here?

W: He's coming here. He said, "We ought to have Dick Scammon come in and give us some general guidance about what the election looks like statistically: the date, and who, where the votes were, and this kind of thing."

B: He was no longer with the Census Bureau?

W: No. He's head of the Elections Research Center. And I asked him to come down, and Cater thought that was a fine idea. It was me and Cater and McPherson, I think Califano was invited. I don't know if he showed up. I know Larry Levinson came by and George Christian was in on one or two of them. Ted Van Dyke on the President's staff was in on one or two of them. Liz Carpenter came by. I guess Ernie Goldstein was down on some of the subsequent ones. It turned into every six weeks or two months. I think Scammon must have come by three or four times. And then following each one of these things, I would do up a memo for the President saying--

B: How soon was this before the campaign of 1968?

W: This started in '67. I think the first one was in the fall of 1967. I was looking at it recently.

B: Did the President direct this kind of meeting?

W: No, he didn't direct it. No, this was my idea, my initiative. I just sent up a memo after it happened. I think Cater, Doug, and I sent up a joint memo the first one, and then after that I did some memos on my own subsequently saying, you know, "We asked Dick Scammon to come by to tell us something about the election. These are the general points he made." Then I wrote up a memo of what Scammon had said. I don't think I ever got a direct response from the President, but I heard that these things were then circulating. I don't know, he just either sent them over to the Democratic National Committee or Arthur Krim or some. . .I gather that they were of great interest to him.

B: At those meetings did anyone ever offer the suggestion that maybe Lyndon Johnson would not be a candidate?

W: No, I don't think so. We were pretty much convinced, I think, that he was going to be a candidate. And Scammon made some very forthright--I mean Scammon is very remarkable in this way. The first of those memos says that--and this is in the fall of 1967 when everybody was talking Vietnam--Scammon said that the big issue in the 1968 campaign is not going to be Vietnam. It's going to be law and order. It's before McCarthy, before anything. And he, of course, turned out to be quite right. I think this is probably the first time he used that phrase of his that came in to a lot of prominence where he said that the election would be decided by "the unyoung, the unpoor, and the unblack." I know I sent that up to the President.

B: Did Scammon originate that phrase?

W: Yes. I don't know if it was said anywhere publicly before, but I remember sending it up to the President in one of the memos. He said the man who is going to determine who the next President is the man who bowls every Wednesday night. It's a pretty acute observation, particularly when people were talking about as it got on into the campaign, "the balance of power was the Negro vote," and "the balance of power was these young dissenters." And of course the young people particularly, they just don't vote. They're not registered. They don't vote. They're moving around. They're too young. And poor people and Negroes vote disproportionately less than other people.

Then I had a lot of direct correspondence on this Negro report, particularly the first--well, the first one and the second one, I was involved in that. That took a lot of time and a lot of meetings that we set up.

B: You mean the idea of using this material in the campaign?

W: No, this was not campaign. This was sort of as a result of the great dialogue in the country about the riots, and then about the Kerner Commission report, and then about law and order and Negroes. It was my feeling that there were so misstatements being made, on both sides--good, bad, but mostly people were saying how terrible everything was; that you had these two really good statistical agencies in government. There was a lot of data; people were making strange sorts of statements that just had no relation to fact, and I said, "Let's get out a document--" as it was called "Social and Economic Conditions of Negroes in the United States," the good and

the bad. What does it say? You know, just lay it out as data, so that if somebody wants to go write a column, let him write at least about what the [facts are]. Let's have this dialogue based on facts, without grinding an ax pro-Kerner, anti-Kerner.

[End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview I]

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