INTERVIEW II

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INTERVIEWEE: BEN J. WATTENBERG

INTERVIEWER: T. HARRI BAKER

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

Tape 1 of 1

B: Mr. Wattenberg, we were talking last time about the group of you who were preparing late in 1967 for what you thought was going to be the 1968 campaign. One question I have--when you were doing that preliminary planning, did the question of whether or not the President could travel come up? You mentioned earlier that in 1966 he had run into just a few demonstrators. Obviously, by 1967/68, that was going to be--

W: Right. I know at one meeting we were in, a meeting of writers--this must have been early '68--he went around the table asking suggestions as to what he ought to be doing. Somebody brought up that he ought to go out and confront the demonstrators if necessary, but go out and press the flesh. And his feeling was [this]. I know he quoted John Connally and I think he may have mentioned Humphrey, also. I know Humphrey's people have substantiated this idea, which is that when a politician gets hounded by demonstrators, it dredges up a huge sympathy vote. Connally had told the President--this is what the President told us--that every time he gets confronted by demonstrators his poll goes up by ten points. The President was well aware of this.

But our feeling was that his feeling was this would just demean the office of the presidency. It's remarkable, you know, he has not yet to this day been really heckled in such a way that it would demean the office. There have been some pickets outside of halls, so he has arranged his appearances. But he hasn't gone out in pre-arranged

parade routes and things like that. That has stopped! But he has traveled all over the country, and he has addressed groups all over the country. But he hasn't done the going out on announced pre-arranged press tours, as we did on that tour I told you about--those series of tours in '66. I think, to my recollection, that was the last time we did it.

B: I was going to say, since then he has gone out, but he has gone to air bases or closed auditoriums, places where presumably there has been some security against demonstrators.

W: Yes, and he has gone out largely unannounced, much to the dismay of the press who somehow feels that their plans for an evening, when they're ruptured, show that the President is a nasty man or something.

B: Did you get the impression there in early 1968 that the President felt--to use the phrase that was later used--like a prisoner of the White House?

W: I never had that feeling, but I wasn't around the President personally a lot where I would hear just what he was saying. I just don't know. I know when we were planning things for him, sending up ideas--"You ought to do this, you ought to do that"--you did not get the feeling that he was a prisoner. The only thing that he seemed to have ruled out--and even then there were a number of occasions that we continued to suggest certain things. I know I had sent up something that suggested he go out--and I know other people had--on a walking-style tour, I think of the ghetto area the way Lindsay had done. He could even do this unannounced. So, in other words, it wasn't so curtailed that even we stopped thinking about it. I mean, there was always recidivity as far as I knew, so I don't think he had imprisoned himself

in his own mind to the point that he didn't want to hear any ideas.

And as I say, if you look at the calendar, he did a lot of traveling. He did visit places.

B: Your planning must have taken into accounting a possible opponent in the 1968 election. Who were you counting on?

W: Well, there was a lot of talk early as to--I remember asking Scammon, "Oughtn't the President to decide at least in his own mind whether he wants to run against Romney or Nixon; and having decided that, well, then there were certain things he could do to make it surer that he would run against one rather than the other." And Scammon's counsel to me was, and I think it was very valid retrospectively, and I suspect I even knew it as I asked it, was, "You just can't get that cute in politics." Because then there's a feedback. They saw, "Well, he's trying to help so-and-so. therefore we Republicans ought to just vote for the other." And it really isn't anything that I think that a President could do that wouldn't get so arcane and a reverse psyche (?)--

B: Did you ever get any impression of whom he would have preferred to run against?

W: Our general feeling, as I recall, was that Romney would be difficult. This was before Romney said that he had been brainwashed and before he came out looking like a Goddamned fool. But originally, you know, Romney was sort of a "Mr. Clean," and he could run on that high moral plateau and call Lyndon Johnson a politician and stuff like that. But it became kind of obvious that Romney was a Spiro Agnew in disguise, and was not such a good candidate. At that point I think the general feeling was that he'd rather run against Nixon than

against Rockefeller, the phrase being that Nixon was a loser. I think the results in this election proved just that--that this guy had so much going for him that even he could win. That was the feeling that I got because he ran a bad campaign in terms of personality. He came across, I think, very, very poorly.

B: Was all this planning going on right up till March 31, 1968?

W: I would be very wrong to say that there was planning going on. One of the things that was just catastrophic, and I only saw a small piece of it, Larry O'Brien was supposedly involved in it and John Bailey and John Criswell, and Valenti was in on it. Everybody was trying to do--I forget who was running the New Hampshire campaign, but you know, it was highly disorganized. The candidate, the potential candidate, the President, didn't go anywhere.

I remember sitting once in Cater's office. Cater and I, we were planning up some kind of a scheme of some political something or other, and the big gag that was running--you know, nobody knows what's going on. I didn't know what's going on, of course. Cater didn't know what's going on, and he's at least a step up above me. And he called Valenti about something. Criswell was almost an impossible man to get a return phone call from. He was sort of doing some of the coordination on this. I remember Cater calling Valenti and asking something. Valenti didn't know what was going on, and he was always regarded as the right-hand man of the President, and he wasn't getting his phone calls returned by Criswell. And I don't think O'Brien really knew what was going on. I suspect that the thing was very much--you know, that nobody really knew what was going on. It was terribly disorganized. I know Scammon was up in New Hampshire and reported back that he's never seen a worse campaign in his life than the one for Johnson.

Just to give you an example that we were indeed in the dark about this, that he was not planning to run, just I guess two-three days before--I have a memo on it--it must be the 27th or 28th of March--the heat against Johnson was getting very, very hot indeed. You know, Kennedy and McCarthy were both on his tail. Cater and I and McPherson and Liz Carpenter and Bess Abell and Ervin Duggan--that's about all I can remember right now--we met with the idea of getting up a full-page ad in the New York Times with a big headline on it saying, "We're Behind You, Mr. President," kind of thing. This was when the heat on Vietnam and on Johnson personally was really--probably it crested right around there.

B: That group you just mentioned wasn't going to sign the ad, was it?

W: No. What we did was put down a list of the people who we had been dealing with--intellectuals, scientists--because every day saw another ad, "Scientists for McCarthy," "Theatre Arts People for Bobby Kennedy," and the lists were getting very impressive. You kind of had the feeling that there wasn't anybody in America who was still for Lyndon Johnson, and he was at that time regarded as an active candidate. And every time somebody came out for McCarthy and Kennedy, that was regarded as a blow to Johnson. So we worked up a list, and a damned impressive list it was, of people who we felt would go along with such a thing, and sent it up to the President. Cater sent it up. We were almost prepared to go ahead and have somebody do it on their own--just get Mr. X or somebody up in New York, Arthur Krim or someone, to put together--you know, we would make the calls for them, but they could just do it without even asking the President. But Cater felt I guess that the President ought to know what was going on, and he just said, "Hold off, don't do anything

on it." We were very miffed, I remember. But he said, "Don't do anything. We didn't do anything on it. But we already had a list all made out and there is a memo on it. So apparently by then, he was already figuring that he was going to not run.

And I know there were a number of other small projects which were, for one reason or another, kind of delayed; never really became active. I know I had suggested, I sent up a memo--there was in the '64 campaign--Myer Feldman had a group that used to meet three times a week called the "5 O'Clock Club" or something, which was sort of the dirty tricks division--you may have heard about it, the whole political thing--to think of ways to get the other candidate in trouble, and you know, to do little funny things.

B: A very effective group, as I recall.

W: Well, I don't know. In '64 everything was effective. I guess they're the ones that set up the "Truth Squad," running behind Goldwater. That kind of thing--sort of a department of dirty tricks, a very quiet group. So I sent up to the President a suggestion. We worked out another list of about five or six people that we thought ought to start meeting right away, and Cater and I were going to do it. Valenti was going to be on it, and three or four other people that we were going to start with, and then let it grow. Start working up some dirty tricks against candidates both in our party and Republicans, you know. I sent that up to the President, and the first word I had back from Jim Jones, as I recall, was, "Well, we'll see. Hang on." Then I waited a couple of weeks and sent it up again; and then I got word back, "Yes, fine, draw up a list of who you're going to have on it." In other words, I had memoed to the

President, and Jones called me back--or Watson called me back and said, "Draw up a list."

Then I drew up a list with Cater's guidance and brought it over to Jim, and just nothing happened. I suspect that was probably also middle March, late March--I could probably check it for you.

B: At that time was there any division among the White House staff about the primary campaigns going on?

W: I don't know if there was division. You know, the feeling was that we were running a very disorganized--if indeed we were in a campaign, it was a hell of a disorganized campaign. And nobody really knew which end was up and what was going on. There was some dismay about it, and the heat was getting very hot.

My whole reaction on the March 31st thing was--after I was here for awhile, four or five months, six months, I came to regard what I was doing here as very much sort of a training period for the '68 campaign because of the nature of things that I was doing. The President had the idea, I think, that I was a good political speech writer. I kept getting back soundings from other people that the President had said, "By God, Wattenberg can really--he's the only guy around here who can really write a good political speech." And we had written some real cut-and-slash kind of tough speeches in the '66 campaign that he liked very much. He used to go around saying, "Boy, that Wattenberg, he really hates Republicans!" That was good, so I kind of figured that I was going to end up. . . .

Then I had gotten involved in writing a lot of this humorous stuff which also is a great political tool. He's a good humorist when he's prepared with some good material. So I kind of had the

feeling that we were really going to do a big campaign, that he was going to go out over a period of months or certainly weeks and take his case to the American people. We thought it was a legitimate case that he was not getting across to the people, that was not getting across, because all of the attention was going to McCarthy and to Bobby at that time, and to the Republicans; and that the case was not being made, and that we would really go out and make this case. I kind of felt that once the thing got into a political phase that I would be very useful. So I was sort of a little crestfallen when it came, because the thing that I was regarding myself as--you know, I had done a couple of speeches for John Bailey, and I had been doing some minimal liaison work with the Democratic National Committee trying to stay. And there were a few other people who were doing it. Roche was doing it, and I guess McPherson in a different way was doing it. We were all trying to get useful for the '68 campaign. I felt that this would be right up my alley. Of course it never came about, so I was kind of--

B: After the withdrawal on March 31st, did you or any of the other White House staff people lend yourself to any of the other Democratic contenders?

W: Yes. First of all, I think it was exclusively for Humphrey, all the people on the White House staff. I know the night that Johnson said he wasn't going to run, my wife was jumping up and down that I should call Ted Van Dyke in the Vice President's staff and say, you know, "I volunteer. What should I do?" kind of thing. I think that probably was the reaction of many people.

I then started--in fact, I even sat in on a couple of the meetings of the Vice President's speech writing team, which Willard Wirtz

was running then, also, a very hush-hush kind of a thing. Planning out ways and means and that kind of thing and actually wrote out a few speeches.

W: Let me interrupt you. Hush-hush and incognito, but surely with Mr. Johnson's knowledge and approval?

B: I don't know about that. You know, Wirtz would know and Johnson would know. I don't know whether Wirtz formally told the President or not. It was supposed to be hushed up. The President's stance was that he was not going to be partisan and he didn't want the White House staff being partisan.

In any event, what I was going to say was after a while, after a month or so, there was apparently enough talk and it was obvious enough to the President, I guess, that a lot of people were doing work for Humphrey. I know I got a call from McPherson to stop, and I said, "Stop getting caught, or just stop?" He kind of fudged, "Stop," but the inflection was, you know, if it's going to be the way. . . After all, writing a speech you can really write on your own time and there's no danger of your getting caught if you're circumspect. But from that time it then became apparent that the Boss wanted us to stop and we stopped pretty much. I know I kept doing some humor for the Vice President every once in a while, but that's a pretty minimal thing. We'd try to help him whatever way we could, but for a while I was actually appearing on the Vice President's speech calendar--you know, Wattenberg is doing this speech and Duggan is doing this speech. And that kind of tapered off because the President didn't want it done. And it wasn't only that. Humphrey was then facing this problem of "Is he his own man or not?"

and the worst story that could have come out is that "Johnson's staff is Humphrey's staff. Lyndon Johnson is really pulling the strings in the Humphrey campaign down to the extent of having his speech writers working for him." So I felt that it just kind of phased out. I did whatever small things could be helpful to the Vice President, passed along some ideas, suggestions, but got out of the mainstream of it.

B: After the convention, you mean, during the campaign itself, or--?

W: Oh, no, this was before the convention.

B: How about then after the convention?

W: After the convention the President--you see, prior to the convention the President didn't even endorse Humphrey. This was a Democratic primary, Presidents don't get into primary fights. So there was at least the veneer of a nonpartisan stance by the White House and by the President.

After the convention this began to change. Of course, the President endorsed Humphrey; and once the President could endorse Humphrey, it could become much more apparent that White House people were working on it. There was no phone call saying, "Yes, you can now go to work for Humphrey," but I think almost everybody--I know I then was starting to write some speeches for the Vice President; feed him ideas; meet with the people. And many people in the White House did this.

B: What was your opinion of the Humphrey campaign?

W: It was also terribly disorganized from what I saw--a terribly disorganized thing--in the early part of it; and just very, very poorly run. I don't think anybody has yet figured out how come there was no real

planning done in advance. He knew from April on--he had a pretty good guess; the smart people felt, even with Bobby Kennedy running, that Humphrey was going to be the nominee. Why they didn't have some money ready for right after that and some immediate firm plans scheduled--and this is when he got hurt very badly. So the Humphrey campaign was not so good. Ultimately the writers they had there were pretty good, or they were getting better; I know John Barlow Martin was working with him for awhile. I used to go up to their headquarters on L Street and Connecticut Avenue, wherever it was; and they had some pretty able guys there.

B: Did it improve as time went on?

W: Yes, it definitely improved as time went on.

B: Did the involvement of the White House staff increase toward the last?

W: I think so. Oh yes, it did intensively toward the last couple of weeks. We all felt our major contribution. But by that time my own feeling and I know the feeling of other people around here was that their major contribution to the Humphrey campaign would be to get Johnson to do the right things in the Humphrey campaign, because we wanted him to go out and help. It was a delicate period for awhile. Like early in the campaign after the convention, that there was sort of a--I know Maguire for example felt that the President ought to go out and talk for Humphrey as frequently and as loudly as possible. And I didn't disagree with it, but I know that I didn't fully agree with it. I just didn't get quite that enthusiastic, because at that time the Vice President still had this, you know, "is he his own man, or is he Johnson's puppet" kind of thing; and

somehow felt that maybe the worst thing that the President could do was go out and really lay hands on overly hard. And he didn't do much of it.

I sent the memo up to the President saying that the best thing Johnson can do for Humphrey is to make Johnson look good, that this would then reduce the albatross factor, because there was an albatross factor on Humphrey about Johnson. I know that the memo I sent up said that he had given this one first speech--the first real political speech to the ILGWU [International Ladies Garment Workers Union]--a taped speech which was then--it was a radio speech and television picked it up. And he hit pretty hard about Nixon; he said Nixon was the one who voted against Medicare; and Nixon was the one who did--I think Maguire did the speech. My memo said that that was fine, but that the following day, as it happened, there were some very beautiful pictures released of the President walking with his grandson on the South Lawn. My remark was that in terms of helping Humphrey, there was more of a net gain by him being seen in a congenial pose with little Lyn than there was in giving this speech, even though it was covered; that by making he, Johnson, look good he was helping Humphrey in the best way that he could, by undercutting the Republican line which was, "Well, Humphrey and Johnson--you know, boy, wasn't that terrible. He was the guy who supported Lyndon Johnson." So if you could build up the President--and I proposed in this thing a series of ideas, of photographs and certain kinds of tours that would not be intensely political but would go out and show an example of some of the Great Society programs and then finally reaching a crescendo with specific political personal endorsements

of Humphrey. He liked this idea very much, I gathered. They were giving a farewell party for Cater at the State Department, and Jones called me here and said the President wanted to meet with me about this memo. But I wasn't here. Barbara, my good friend here, was here, and Barbara said I was at this party which many people had been invited to, and I think Jones finally showed there. I don't know. Apparently the President said, "If Ben is around, let him come in and we'll talk about this memo," and I wasn't around; and Jones said, "Well, don't bother calling him, just forget about it." Apparently the next day Jones and the President had discussed the memo then, and set some of these things in motion. Of course, I was once again heart-broken. I really would have loved to have sat down with him and suggested a number of--follow through on these ideas, but it didn't work out that way. I then got very angry at Barbara for not calling me over at the State Department, because I would have run right over.

B: You never did get a chance to discuss it with him directly?

W: Not directly. But Jim told me that he did sit down with my memo and went through it point by point. There were some relatively obvious points based on the central theme that he ought to go out and make himself look good. After that, I don't know if it was coincidence or not, but there were a number of flattering kinds of pictures and situations that began to come up. He did end up--Johnson--looking pretty good during the campaign, was my feeling.

Then toward the last week or ten days, we were then specifically suggesting occasions and writing political speeches. The President finally did make one weekend swing where he went to Pikesville and

Morgantown, West Virginia, and then the next day up to New York City. He made a series of three-four very good speeches that didn't get massive coverage, partly because they weren't advanced to the press because he was still making these things quickly. But I wrote the Morgantown speech which I thought was a pretty good speech. I think McPherson did the one that was up the next day in New York, and it was a very good speech. Maguire was increasingly active in this political operation. I think he did the tape of the final, the one that was taped for the Sunday before the end of the campaign about Humphrey personally. He finally did get off the dime--Johnson--and did a real political effort. But, of course, this was the whole time that the bombing thing was going on, and it became apparent that it was going on. It was very much in the news, and he was not criticized for not going out so much for Humphrey, because it was clear what was going on. Of course, the greatest thing that he could have done for Humphrey was just what he did, is get the bombing pause before the election. I know I was questioned--I guess we met with some German politicians the day after the election, or the day after the bombing halt, and they couldn't believe that this wasn't politically motivated.

B: There were a lot of people that couldn't believe it.

W: There were a lot of people. I cannot believe, just knowing how this man operates, that there was anything political about it. I'm sure he would have preferred to have it before the election, but he was going to do what he had to do. The general feeling you get, and I haven't worked with him that closely personally, but the general feeling you get around here is that he's a guy who does what's right;

what he thinks is right. He isn't always right, but he does what he thinks is right. And you know the old cliché that he uses again and again was that when he first came into office, somebody came up and they said, "I know you're going to do what's right, Mr. President." And his response was, "Yes, of course, I'm going to do what's right, but the hard thing is not to do what's right, but to figure out what's right." And you know that's really the story of his Presidency. I think that's probably how most Presidents operate, and that's why I come away from here with a very high opinion of Johnson, sure, but a very, very high opinion of how the Presidency works. The feeling is, in my lifetime anyway, all the Presidents we've had have really operated under that basic principle of, let's figure out what's right. These aren't devious, political men trying to scrape up an extra point in their popularity poll.

B: To back up in time a little, what were the circumstances of Bill Moyers' departure from the President's staff?

W: Well, I don't know. I think I mentioned to you--I think I wasn't here more than a few days when Moyers told me "in strict confidence" that he was flying up the next day to Hamilton College; that they were interested in getting him as their president. As it happened I went to school in upstate New York at Hobart and had mentioned that to him, and he wanted to know what kind of country it was and everything else. Then periodically he would be mentioning--talking about--this is placing it in time, middle August, as far as I know, that he was already looking. And then I think he mentioned--

B: Middle August of--

W: '66, yes. I know he mentioned this Newsday thing to me, I think, during

the Asian trip, that he was thinking about it. Of course, his brother died around that time, and I think that was the thing that put him over the edge on it. He definitely had to leave for financial reasons as well. I think he was planning to leave before that anyway, as I recall it, but that kind of put him over the top. Then there was a series of very unfortunate stories that came out when he left which really shows something strange about the press as far as I'm concerned. You know, the basic gist of the stories was, "here was Bill Moyers, this wonderful, wonderful, humorous, alert, intelligent, humane, young man who happened to be working for the biggest son-of-a-bitch in the western world, Lyndon Johnson"--poor Bill Moyers kind of thing. And I gather that this enraged the President. I think if I were President it would have enraged me also. And Moyers understood this, I think, and was distressed by it.

B: The news stories enraged the President.

W: Yes. So I gathered. I've discussed this with Moyers since as a matter of fact. McNamara got the same kind of treatment later on, "here was McNamara 'the dove'; and Johnson was 'the hawk,' and McNamara was this wonderful man who had revitalized the Defense Department and wanted to deescalate and was all these wonderful, brilliant, computer-like, smart, wisdom incarnate kind of a man who happened to be cast by the fates to work for this nasty, nasty butcher in the White House!" And again I think the President was somewhat turned off, although not as badly as with Moyers.

B: Did the President tend to take out his rage with the press on the individual involved?

W: Yes, I think in Moyers' instance he did. It got very cold around Bill

Moyers that last couple of weeks he was here, or after the announcement was made. But what I started to say is that the absurd thing about the way the press handled that is, it seemed to me, always that the really interesting [thing]--Bill Moyers is a very bright guy, he's a very nice guy, I worked well with him, I like him, I respect him, but there are a lot of bright guys in America, a lot of bright young guys--the fascinating thing about that whole relationship was not that Bill Moyers was a bright young guy because there are a lot of bright young guys. He's a particularly able and bright guy. The amazing thing was that the President of the United States would take a twenty-nine year old bright guy and invest him with enough clout that he could be called legitimately the number-two man in government. That is the amazing part of the story--that a guy would recognize that kind of ability in a guy that young and really give him the tools to do something with it. And I think Moyers executed pretty damned well. Of course, the press completely missed that. [Art] Buchwald finally did a funny column on it, about how Bill Moyers went around when he was a young man trying to find a good President to work for, and he finally picked on Lyndon Johnson. You know, he ought to make this man President so he could be at his right hand. But this was a spoof. There were people who said when Moyers left this place just wouldn't function without Bill Moyers. Of course, the guy who makes this place function is Lyndon Johnson, and always had, even with Moyers here as far as I know. And this is not to denigrate his role because it was a very powerful and very important one.

Anyway, it's funny--I had to come down. I had never met

Moyers before coming down here, and I worked for him and worked sort of well with him. And just when he was leaving, my sort of consultancy period was up. I was working as a consultant on a per diem rate, and I had to decide whether I was going to stay on as a staff man of one sort of another, or go back to Connecticut and just say, well, I had worked for the campaign. By that time I was kind of intrigued by life down here. I wanted to stay on, and told this to Bill, and he thought that that was a good idea. He told me he sent in a memo to the President saying that he, the President, should make me a special assistant. In other words, Moyers was leaving and I guess he was trying to cover for the President the hole that he would be leaving in terms of the speech thing. That at least is what he told me. Moyers had a way of sometime exaggerating things and talking a little bigger than the facts were, but that in any event is what he told me.

The memo came back from the President to Moyers. So Moyers told me, "He says 'take it up with Kintner," which is like the kiss of death, because if I was going to go any place in the White House, it certainly wasn't going to be through Kintner. Then I sort of got word around the White House that the President regarded me as a Moyers[man]. I was on Cater's staff at the time, and Cater wanted me to stay on. I think he wrote a nice note to the President about me saying that I ought to be put on. And I think the word sort of was around that the President regarded me as a Moyers man, and that this was kind of jeopardizing my position. Because I wasn't really on the White House [staff]. I had been a consultant, and I was on staff, but I wasn't on full-time payroll and now I wanted to stay on. Ultimately I think Cater and McPherson and I don't know who. . .Then

Moyers left and--I'm just wondering when I got the final word. I guess I was in New York and I called down to Cater--it was over the Christmas holiday of '66--that yes, I was to be on staff full-time, and they'd settled on a salary level and therefore it would be all right.

B: Not technically as a special assistant?

W: No. That was just sort of forgotten about. It wasn't forgotten about, I think. I forget just exactly how it worked. It's valuable here not because it means more money or because it puts you over anybody necessarily, but certain things like--you know, it is good to have a Presidential appointment and a title if you can get it. Some guys do a lot of very important work without it. Some guys don't do very much with it. But it's still very desirable to have, was my feeling. It did not work out that way. There was for awhile some resistance on the President's part--that he regarded me as quote a Moyers man. I think Cater ultimately pointed out to him that I had never known Moyers until I came down here. Sure, I worked well with him, I liked him--I still do; but you know, I was a Johnson man, not a Moyers man. Again, this was the absurd kind of thing. Here was a guy who was thirty-three years old who was completely, as any assistant is, a creature of the Presidency; and yet people splitting him up into--that he was on Moyers side or he was on the President's side. And Moyers understood very well that he was a creature of the Presidency and of the President. I don't think he ever fooled himself that he wasn't. I think this is one of the reasons why he wanted to leave, for the same reason that a lot of people want to leave--you want to set up an independent identity.

B: Did Moyers ever express any resentment about this coolness that developed between him and the President there at the time of his leaving?

W: Again, resentment is a term that applies to equals. Moyers, you know, didn't resent the President of the United States, he was hurt by it, he was upset by it. But I never had the feeling that this was a relationship of equals. So resent is the wrong word. I think he was hurt by it. The President, he felt, was sort of bad-mouthing him. He had heard reports back--as you do here, when the President is on you--you don't necessarily get it firsthand, but that he had been saying some bad things about Bill. It had come back to him from various sources--had called him and told him that the President said X and the President said Y.

One of the stories that was floating around was the President had apparently told somebody, which I think is valid, that Bill went down to the ranch and they had a long two-hour conversation down on the banks of the river there. So the President said Bill was just hinting in every way that the President should ask him to stay on. And the President wasn't about to--you know, this was the President's way of saying that he was canned, not that he left on his own. But my feeling is that he did leave on his own, that there was some ill will certainly that came out at that time. It's a matter of record that Moyers was not invited to Lynda's wedding, for example, and I think every other important assistant was. So there was a cooling.

B: Does that still continue? What's their relationship now?

W: I don't know. I think it continues essentially. I mean, it has

probably eased off a little bit. Although I know that shortly after Moyers left, he was still commuting back and forth from Long Island to Washington. He had his home here in Washington. He had a little dinner party at his house where I think Shriver, who was his old boss, and Johnson, who was his most recent boss, and his new boss, [Captain Harry F.] Guggenheim [editor-in-chief] Newsday , from Newsday. There was a little dinner party for eight, and the President and Mrs. Johnson did go out, as I understood. So it wasn't as total perhaps as some people might have thought.

But again, I don't know. Moyers was sort of under a cloud here. There were a number of us who, in the ensuing year or year and a half--I know when the campaign came up, there were a couple of times, first of all, the word was out that Moyers would love to come work on the campaign, and I don't know what ever happened about that. Then there were a number of things that he was recommended [for]. Every time a good appointment for a citizen board or an appointment to some commission or something, Moyers' name was suggested a number of times. I know I once suggested it for one thing to Cater, and Cater I know--Moyers retained good relationships with many of us on the White House staff. He kind of felt that there were some guys who were his friends and some guys who were his enemies. Many of us tried to get him back into the good graces kind of thing. I don't think it ever really worked.

And then this was this very unfortunate thing--I don't know whether Moyers was misquoted or not--when he came out on that Humphrey thing as if Humphrey had been a dove all along. I can't believe

that Moyers meant that the way it came out because it came out looking as if Moyers was running the Vice President. It just didn't come out right. Bill has more sense than that. I don't think that it could have been quite the way it sounded.

B: Did Moyers' departure cause on the White House staff any rivalry to take the kind of position he had occupied? Is there some sort of shifting of power lines?

W: There was a shifting of power, but I don't know if it was--you know, Califano's troops sort of swooped into the substantive area that Bill--Califano had already been doing that substantive work. I know Larry Levinson had mentioned to me once they know that when they send up a memo to the President and it doesn't come back, that it was usually sitting on Moyers' desk. Moyers wasn't there, so it stayed--you know, went back to Califano I would gather. So some of this substantive work he was doing fell to Califano. Much of the speech writing and that aspect of what he was doing devolved onto McPherson's shoulders, who I think did it very ably in most instances. And I think Harry was closer to the President than he had been with Moyers, and I think the President might have started going to Harry for the kinds of things he would have gone to Bill for.

B: Did the staff get the impression that the President was deliberately trying to avoid setting up another possible number two man?

W: I don't think that it was ever that formal a thought on the President's part, or on the staff's part.

B: Is there much rivalry among the various people on the White House staff?

W: I don't know how to answer that really. In many ways--

B: You've got very able and very ambitious young men, most of them with good careers still before them, all of them in positions of or close to power.

W: Yes. Well, I think there is, yes. You know, I had always heard that Cater may have felt that perhaps he was in rivalry with Califano and sort of on the losing end of the substantive argument of that, although Cater probably had some personal relationships with the President that Califano did not have. Fred Panzer--have you interviewed him? Is he on your list?

B: He is on the list.

W. You ought to talk to him. He's a good guy. He had a great line. People used to ask him what did he do. He'd say, "I'm in business for myself." The way this particular White House staff worked--there was a lot of that--is that you really are in business for yourself. You're serving the President, and I guess formally I was on Cater's staff and there were certain things I did for Cater and went through Cater on, but I had the ability to write memos directly to the President. This was to me all along one of the--you know, people say, "Well, Johnson wasn't interested in new ideas." That was about as bunk a statement. You know, this was a guy who swooped upon new ideas, and encouraged people at relatively low echelon, certainly within the White House staff, to communicate with him directly. There were times when a Cabinet Secretary might say one thing and I might send up a memo perhaps not even knowing that I was contradicting a Cabinet Secretary, and he'd go my way.

I just recall one small little instance. There was the 200 millionth American came in, I guess, November of 1967, and I proposed several

plans about half a year earlier, none of which came to beans. Then there was going to be a ceremony over at Commerce with the big census clock showing 200 million Americans. I thought he ought to go because it was a real landmark kind of thing, and wrote a memo to that effect, saying that there was this one theme--this theme of 1976, 200 years of America, that he could sound off on there; and also just the graphics of it, having the President standing in front of the census clock when it actually hit 200 million. would guarantee his press coverage all over the world. I showed it to Cater; and Cater said, "Jesus--" he had just heard from Willard Wirtz, and Wirtz had been recommending to the President, or recommending to him--Cater, "God, one place the President shouldn't go near is the 200 million American thing." Exactly why I don't know; part of it is this whole population explosion thing. You know, we're trying to sell other countries that they ought to keep their population down and we might be crowing about it. In any event I sent the memo up, and the President came right back within a couple of hours saying, "Yes, write the speech, and let's see it." And he ended up going, and he got very, very good coverage on it on television and the newspapers.

B: Did you write that speech?

W: Yes. Where were we? Yes, you really are very much in business for yourself; but there is rivalry also. I think this White House staff certainly, and probably any White House staff, but this one functions like a medieval court. And there's no sense deluding yourself. You're personal staff to the President, and your whole position, power, clout, role, whatever you want it, depends on what the President

thinks of you, and what he wants you to do for him. So there is some lateral elbowing, sure, and some lateral jealousies and things like that, but primarily there are a series of direct relationships, or semidirect. Still with Moyers around here, there were a lot of stories in the paper about how the White House was split in two people. There were conservatives like Marvin Watson and liberals like Moyers and McPherson and Cater. And I don't know. I perhaps wasn't as tuned in as I ought to have been, but I thought that was an exaggeration. Sure there were guys from different backgrounds, and it would be absurd for a President to have a staff all of whom were liberals or all of whom were Easteners or all of whom were Texans or all of whom were whatever, and he didn't. A guy like Watson was not going to have the same kind of ideas as a guy like Moyers. Because of the nature of our press vehicle, the liberal members of the staff become the darlings traditionally; and Watson, Valenti got a very, very bad press. I wasn't here with Valenti. Watson, you know, was not an ogre by any means. He was an able guy, and he did what he was told by the President. He wasn't here to be imaginative or creative or think of new ideas. He was here to be appointments secretary and frequently just to be a transmission belt to and from the President, which he performed very well. You always knew where you stood with him, I thought.

There was a rivalry, I think, between Moyers and Watson at one time.

B: Does this kind of rivalry, not necessarily between Moyers and Watson but among the staff generally, really get down to such things as size of desk, location of offices, access to automobiles?

W: No. Maybe in other agencies. But for exactly the reason that I told you here, the only thing that counts is--You know, I can have a little tiny office over in E.O.B., but if the President calls me on the phone or sends stuff down saying, "Ask Wattenberg to do such-and-such," or, "Have Wattenberg call so-and-so, or something like that, then that's worth all the big offices and all the cars, and vice versa. I'm not saying that this happened, but the power and the clout depends not on desks or secretaries or office space or anything else, but on the relationship with the President. And there's some logic to that.

B: Getting back to something we've touched on several times, this business of writing a speech for the President in the sense of tailoring it to his speech patterns--what he wants to say and so on. How do you go about doing that?

W: It kind of comes naturally after awhile. The basic idea is to write decent, declarative English sentences; and decent, intelligent, declarative, simple English sentences can usually be read by anyone.

B: Do you get specific instructions on things like "keep it short?"

W: Yes. He had a number of meetings with us where he went on and on about what he wanted were 400 word speeches, four-letter words, four-word sentences, four-paragraphs. I don't know, a whole song-and-dance about how that he was a very simple, earthy man, and you know, that Lincoln's speeches were simple and everybody's speeches--And he had this columnist named MeFo, M. E. Foster, in the Houston Chronicle when he grew up. He was such a simple man; and he got Kintner to xerox some of MeFo's columns as to how simple they were. Then he used to go on about four-word sentences four-paragraphs--

B: The columnist's name was M.E. Foster, and he was called MeFo?

W: Yes. But of course the President, despite the fact that he may have thought or said he thought--I don't think that he thought so, but said he thought that he was just this plain, simple, old Texas farmer. You know, he was about as plain and simple a Texas farmer as I am. This is a complicated, highly articulate man. To write for him in four letter words and four sentence you know, whatever would be wrong. There were some people here, a couple of the writers, Sparks, perhaps Hardesty, who thought you ought to "put it in Pedernales" which I thought, coming from a guy like Sparks, was about as condescending and patronizing to a man like Lyndon Johnson as could possibly be. This was a man admittedly who couldn't and shouldn't speak in this orotund Kennedy rhetoric or Stevensonian kind of prose of long sentences. You know, he couldn't quote Aeschylus and he shouldn't quote Sophocles, because it was obvious that somebody would be doing it for him. That's not his style.

But this was a thoughtful man and a profound man in his way. I finally once did up a long memo for him after I had been here--this was right around the New Year, Moyers was still here. I did a long, long speech memo telling him what I thought about the whole speech process and disagreeing with some of these--went to the instance of counting up the number of words that's in these MeFo columns, how many words per sentence. Of course, there were fourteen or fifteen words per sentence--not four words. You know, he always used to talk about the Gettysburg Address--simple, short. Well, the first sentence of the Gettysburg Address is something like sixty-three words or something like that. I forget what it was. And I had this long speech memo which I then sent in to Moyers. It was addressed to the President, but I wanted Moyers'

reaction. Moyers, I think, suggested that I write it. And then he gave me counsel not to send it in, because it was kind of a sharp memo saying that the President was wrong about that and wrong about this. And I ended up, in that instance, not getting it sent up.

But, in any event, my feeling was that this was an intelligent, articulate man. If you listened to him talk, you could see that he wasn't any Palooka talking four letter words. He deserved as good writing as you could get, within certain strictures. You know, you weren't going to do things that were wholly foreign to his background and to his style.

B: Can you give an example of that?

W: Well, I once quoted [Eliot] when the Chancellor of Austria came. It was in April, it was right after the riots. I was doing a little welcoming statement for the South Lawn for the President. I wrote it starting off with the [T.S.] Eliot quotation about April. That is Eliot, isn't it? "April is the cruelest month," something like that. It was a pretty good speech, I thought it was a very good speech, as a matter of fact. And McPherson immediately cut that part of it out. He said, "When the President quotes T. S. Eliot, they're going to say 'McPherson or Wattenberg or who wrote it' kind of thing," which is true. I kind of felt that I had used it in such a way that we could get away with it, because it spoke of some very timely things. In any event, we didn't use it, but that gives you the kind of example of the kind of thing that we would steer away from. In a way, of course, McPherson was right. It lent itself to some wise guy columnist being able to say, "Well, sure, Lyndon Johnson is there reading T. S. Eliot all day

long." Of course, you know Bobby Kennedy played the game that he was deeply immersed in the Greek tragedies all the time, and they bought this. But they weren't buying that about Lyndon Johnson. So it was that kind of thing.

B: One other thing about the writing of speeches, how about humor? Did he always want humor in his speeches?

W: This is the one thing I probably had as much to do with around here as anyone. As I mentioned to you earlier, frequently--like over my dead body because it kind of got to be--people would come up to me in the White House staff and introduce me, "He's the guy who writes the funny things for the President." You know. "He's a gag writer," and that kind of thing, which was really the last thing I wanted to be.

B: How did you fall into that?

W: Well, it was kind of funny the way it worked. I don't know what his previous use of humor had been, but in the spring of '67 Harry McPherson asked me to do a speech for the President for delivery to the Gridiron Club--I had never been to a Gridiron Club thing--and explaining the kind of format, that it is basically funny and with a sort of serious message at the end. I had very short notice on it and I did it. McPherson thought it was just the funniest speech he'd ever seen. I keep saying this was a pretty good speech, but I thought it was a funny speech. This was for a Saturday night appearance. And it didn't get to the President mostly because of how late I had finished it. I got the assignment on Saturday afternoon. McPherson sent it down. I think Jake Jacobsen was there in the office, and McPherson sent it down saying, "Boy, this was really

a good speech. The President might want to go just because his speech was so funny." He ended up not going. He had really planned not to go, I guess. I think I heard that he went over to that group--there was a publishers' conference or something in town also--and I think I heard later that in the car he gave Humphrey the copy of his speech, saying it was a good speech and he wasn't to go, but Humphrey might want to use some of this stuff, which I think he ultimately did. This was for the Gridiron Club.

In any event to my knowledge from the time that I had been there anyway, which was from August of '66 till the spring of '67, I really can't recall the President saying anything funny, giving a humorous speech, not once. I gathered there were a few occasions in the past where he had done some humorous kind of stuff, but again not very much as far as I know.

So I wrote a memo up saying--this was in the spring of '67--that it's time that Americans had a chance to see their President in an other than somber mood, that this would help him and it would be good for the country and everything else. There were four or five occasions coming up. The White House press correspondents' dinner was the most notable, but there was a White House press photographers. In the spring or thereabout, there is Gridiron Club, and those two, and I think one other, Women's National Press Club, which called for funny speeches. And the President is always invited. It's sort of like the Al Smith Dinner in New York. And [sent up this memo] suggesting that he go and give a funny speech. He wrote back saying that the Gridiron Club remarks were excellent and had he had them earlier,

he would have gone; and yes, prepare these.

I let the first one or two slide by, and then it came up, was he going to go to this White House Press Correspondents Association dinner, which is sort of a big black tie dinner. So I did him up a speech for that. It was on a Friday night, and I remember working on it Thursday night. I had done a draft myself, and then I had a friend of mine here in Washington named Jeff Stansbury coming in to give me some last minute help on it. Carol Weida, who was my assistant here, who had Barbara's job, stayed late that night and she tossed in a couple of either ideas or helped sort of work on it. And I didn't finish it up until late at night, and sent it in through the usher's office that night to the President.

This is another example of how this speech process worked. The standard stuff that you've got on the speech schedule would usually go up through Maguire, and it would go up with one of his notes on it saying, "This was written by Wattenberg," such-and-such. But frequently you ended up doing this kind of thing that I'm describing now in this instance. I sent it up by myself with my own covering note, suggesting to him that he go to this thing even if he didn't want to give this speech. George Christian had mentioned I think to me and to a number of people that the press really had hoped that he would come. This was shortly after George came in, and it was sort of a test of whether George could deliver the President to the press.

Apparently the President liked the speech and went and delivered it and was just great! He was absolutely--you know, it was a smash. I was there. Many of the White House staff people were invited.

I was about as nervous as could possibly be. It's funny, but when you write a serious speech for the President and you're in the audience, you're maybe a little nervous because you know what it's going to say. But watching the President give something funny that you've written, it really becomes like a playwright kind of a thing. Because you just know the kind of reaction--if he's going to tell something and he isn't going to get a laugh, that's like the worst thing in the world.

So I was sitting at a table there and just before he came on--ultimately I just got up and walked to the back of the room because I was really like a caged panther or something. And he gave it, and he was really great! This was an off-the-record speech, but there were subsequently a number of comments that ultimately did come out of it. There was a line in there about Walter Lippmann, sort of an anti-Walter Lippmann line that the President then further embellished. It was sort of a Walter Lippmann line, and then the President ended up calling him--he just extrapolated himself--a famous columnist of yesteryear or something like that. And Herb Block wrote a big article for the Washington Post, the "Outlook" section, about how the Administration was ganging up on poor Walter Lippmann and mentioned--I forget the phrase, but he said there was such and such occasion and then there was the occasion at the White House Press Correspondents' thing where the President's speech was so good, so humorous, and so to the point that everybody was wondering who wrote it. That kind of thing, which is of course the worst kind of response to get in one way. And I know, all that

evening, of course, the guys on the White House staff who knew I had written it kept coming up to me and saying, "Great speech, Ben, really great!" I was really mum as could be. But because the White House guys were talking about it, I guess ultimately a couple of press people came up and said, "I heard you wrote that speech," I kind of said, "Well, n-o-o-o. . ." You know, the play was usually to not lie about not having written it, but not confess that you were the writer of anything--to preserve this anonymity of the speech writers.

But anyway it really went over very, very well. It was the kind that was poking some fun at the press. I thought it was a funny speech.

So from then on the President did a lot of humor, really a lot. Almost every speech for awhile was getting a page, page and a half, two-three-four hundred words of funny stuff. He has got a very good sense of timing. He has got a very good sense of humor of his own. You know frequently he'd put humorous stuff in on his own, just as he's talking, sort of by intonation or just tell a funny story or something like that. But he was getting a very good response on this kind of stuff, because of course it warms up an audience to begin with. It reached the stage that on a series of three or four things in a row that he had done in the East Room, the coverage he was getting was on the humor and not on the substance of the bill or something--which was also all right, because you were ending up seeing on Huntley-Brinkley the President telling a joke or two; and Chet or David would mention that that took place because of a signing of the something-or-other bill. But it reached a stage where, like

many things the President does, when it's something that he wants to do, "pow! in with both feet!"

And ultimately there was a ceremony signing of a retardation bill, I remember, that I was bitterly opposed to. The President said, "Let's get some humor on the front of it." I was bitterly opposed to it, and it ended up somebody else--I think Maguire or somebody--wrote a humor on it. I recall sending up--either I wanted to send up a memo saying that he ought not to use it because it really wasn't in keeping with the occasion. You know, you don't make jokes about--The jokes were not about mental retardation obviously, but that was not the occasion to do it. I think I told either Maguire or McPherson--I don't know what exactly happened, but he ended up giving them. He got a great response on it, and nobody did say what I feared that they would say, that it was in bad taste to do it.

But it went on and on. He was really using a lot of humor. And people were beginning to talk about it. There was an item in Newsweek or something about the President's gag writers, something--that he had gotten some West Coast comedy writer to write stuff, which of course was not so.

Then I got a call from Norma Milligan of Newsweek saying that they were going to do a piece about Presidential humor, how much humor he was using; and that she understood that I was writing all of this humor. I said, "You want to assume that, you go ahead and assume it, but I'm not saying that." I didn't deny it, but I attempted to say that the President did a lot of it on his own and that other people did it, which was true. It wasn't the one-man thing. My feeling was that it would be damaging to the President, and to any

future use of humor. If people started talking--even more so than with speech writers, at least the people understand that they've got all these speech writers. But the idea of somebody writing jokes for the President means that every time he's going to say something funny, people were going to think "who's writing the joke on it." You see, this is the kind of idiotic bind you get into with working for a President.

So I sent the memo up to the President--I showed it to George Christian--telling him that Norma Milligan of Newsweek had called. She had also called George I guess, and we'd each more or less told her the same thing. But I then sent up a memo to the President saying that as much as I thought this humor was good, that he ought to continue using it, he ought to not use it at every speech and every time, because people were then going to start talking about the Presidential gag writers; and then it's going to talk about Johnson laughing while Vietnam burns; and that while I was the number one proponent of humor, there really had to be some kind of exercise of judgment on it. [I] suggested that he meet with me and Liz Carpenter.

Then one day I got a call from Marvin saying that Liz Carpenter and I ought to provide something funny. The President wanted her and me to work very closely together. After I started doing this kind of thing, she started--she's a witty woman, and we would go over to her office and. . .Then we ultimately got a whole group, Liz and I and Ervin Duggan and Fred Panzer and Peter Benchley and Jack McNulty and a couple of guys--a guy from the State Department named Dave Waters and Alvin Spivak, who was a newsman and ultimately

was Humphrey's press secretary--and this is a good way to write humor, and you can do it in about half-an-hour. Liz would have a bottle of scotch there or something, and we'd have a drink in the late afternoon. You could come up with some pretty funny stuff relatively quickly.

B: Do you ever use the President as a source? He has got a reputation as being, in private at least, a fairly accomplished raconteur.

W: Oh, he's a great raconteur. But those are frequently stories, you know, which he will know himself and he will tell them on his own. The kind of stuff we were providing was something particularly topical, a one-liner, or a series of related ones. The thing that worked best was to take a topic, you know--if it was giving the National Freedom Medal to McNamara, you had six jokes about McNamara, or if it was about something else, the jokes related to it, rather than just stand up patter about, you know, here are six unrelated jokes.

B: Was by any chance the occasional reference to Mr. McNamara as the "Stacomb Kid," the product of the speech writers as opposed to Mr. Johnson?

W: No. We would never use anything like that. That supposedly was a remark Johnson made at the first Cabinet meeting when he met McNamara, the guy with Stacomb.

So this thing kind of burgeoned. In any event, I suggested that he meet with McPherson and me and Liz and talk about the right role of humor and gave him a yes-no choice at the end of this memo telling him he was saying too much humor. You end up even reading the check marks as to whether they're pleasant "nos," or unpleasant

"no"; and the feeling that I got in this one was that it was a very unpleasant "no"; that he was kind of mad that anyone was suggesting that he was doing it too much, and this kind of thing. And, no, he didn't want to meet about it. But he definitely began to do it with not every speech, and not all the time. It really seemed to me--and George agreed with me, Christian agreed with me at this time--that he was going too far, and we were exposing ourselves to this kind of thing. Thereafter he used humor frequently, either a couple of jokes in the beginning--depending on the speech, of course.

B: When you prepare speeches, do you leave the President the option? That is, do you put humor in them in a way that he can cut it out if he wishes?

W: Well, it normally comes at the beginning of the speech. The speech stands as a unit, and the humor stands as a unit. If he wants to use it, he uses it; if he doesn't want to use it, he doesn't use it. He can cut out individual jokes, which he frequently does. Occasionally he has asked for them rewritten so the humor appears in the middle of the speech which you can do. We had some very successful sorts of experiences with it. I think it contributed a little bit to humanizing the President. It was very helpful to him, really.

B: Do you ever get dismayed at the President's delivery, particularly on television?

W: Dismayed is a very gentle word. The thing is that in person the guy is [charismatic]. You know, I hesitate to use the word the way it's been used around, but the man's a charismatic man. He's articulate, humorous--you know, a great guy to listen to, a pungent speaker. And on television he's deadly. He's just terrible! I

know when I first came back here, when I went back to Stanford and said, "Well, I met the President. I was in some meetings with him, and he's an articulate, educated, alert, humorous [man], people looked at me as if I had just come back from Mars or something. They wouldn't believe it, because he was really very bad on television. There were periodic discussions on how could he look better, and there were attempts--

B: I was going to ask you if the speech writers ever offered their advice on what amounts to show biz.

W: Oh, yes.

B: But it never worked?

W: Well, it's sort of funny the way the thing shaped up. Very frequently the speeches, many speeches that he gave. . .Let me put it this way, he made some wonderful--first of all, when he speaks on his own even in front of television, he's pretty good.

B: When he ad libs.

W: When he ad libs. He got to be a very good speech reader as well, in some instances. Somehow it just seemed that the really good speeches that he made were not the ones that were on television--in terms of delivery. The ones that were on television, of course he was using that teleprompter, and it always looked as if he were playing President. He just didn't come across well. He came across terribly, and there were a number of suggestions as how this could be [improved]. In this last week before election, I know I sent up a suggestion. Humphrey had been on television just sitting on a stool talking ad lib--did you see that one--just to a bunch of students. And I suggested that the President do this kind of thing.

He evinced some interest in this idea, but of course it came to nothing.

B: There was an episode before that of the news conference in which he used the throat microphone.

W: The throat microphone, that was the one sort of breakthrough, and he was great in that. I remember Scammon--this was in one of these periodic meetings we had, and I think I sent it up to the President and I think there was a general acknowledgement of that--said, "This is the kind of candidate--" Everybody is sort of regarding Johnson as somebody you can kick around with impunity, but "remember that this is the potential that he could be campaigning with." It really was an awesome thing to a number of Republicans, I think, who sort of thought, "Well, here was Johnson. Here was an easy man to kick around, You could call him names, you could call him hawk and a baby-burner and all these wonderful things And he came on television and he looked terrible." Except here was this graphic evidence that he really could deliver the goods.

B: Does it make a difference to the man when he's making a formal speech on a momentous topic? Does he very much feel that he's the leader of the western world going on record and hence is somewhat inhibited in his delivery?

W: I think that's probably correct. But there were a number of efforts to get him off the formal speech thing. They had newspapermen in his office on occasion. They had a special with him down on the ranch which was very good. That was before my time. But on balance it never really worked very well. You know, he just never came through, partly because already there was a mental set that people felt. You know, invariably it's funny the way when he ended up making a

big speech--more people came up to me after the March 31 speech, which I had nothing to do with, and said, "Boy, that was really a great speech!"

Why was it a great speech? It is because he told them he was de-escalating in Vietnam. That's why, and because he made this momentous announcement, so everybody remembers it. It was a good speech, but there were a lot of speeches as good or better, I think. I don't remember that one that well. They would tell you speeches were great when people said, "You know, that's a great speech he gave," just five days before the election, that Thursday night speech about the bombing pause. That was a terrible speech. I thought it was a terrible speech. I don't even remember the words, it was so badly filmed. You know, they taped it here; just gave a dreadful appearance. And in fact it was a great speech. It said what people wanted to hear.

B: That's the one that was taped in at least two segments?

W: I think so, there were a lot of stories about it. But again, I had nothing to do with that. But it had reached the point where we were talking before, as if there was sort of a selective perception. People saw Johnson and tuned out what they didn't want. In other words, on a number of instances, for example--we were talking about humor--the President was on television and was saying something funny. And people laughed. He was very good, particularly good at humor. He did it very well and it was generally acknowledged by everybody. I don't think any columnist--well, it occurred a couple of times--remarked because of this stuff that Lyndon Johnson was humorous or anything like that. I don't think that despite the fact that he was on television there was a single soul among

the 200 million Americans at that time who said, "Gee, you know, Lyndon Johnson's a humorous man," which we would imagine would be a plus, not because they had never seen him on television being humorous, but because they had established this set in their mind of what he was. Yet Bobby Kennedy could go out and do the same kind of humorous stuff--and he was pretty good at it--and everybody spoke about his sharp wit. They wouldn't give that to Johnson because that wasn't what they were expecting, and they refused to recognize it.

B: It's known that some of Mr. Johnson's private story-telling gets kind of profane on occasion. Has there ever been any fear that if he started being more relaxed and informal in his public speeches that some of the profanity might come out?

W: I wish that he got that relaxed in his really public speeches where they televise stuff; but no. You know when you think about it this man has a--you know, if you just followed Humphrey and Nixon and Romney and the kind of things that they said--this man Johnson has been in office for five years now; and with almost no exceptions in a public instance has he said anything wrong. He has got remarkable control. You know the worst thing--with all the provocation that he has got on the Vietnam issue and what he thinks about it personally, the worst thing he has ever called his opponents in this is "nervous Nellies." I mean they've called him butcher, baby-burner--asked him how many kids he killed today, the whole thing; and he is not kindly disposed to them. But the worst that his rhetoric reached was "nervous Nellies." And God, we'd heard about that for six months, you know. Imagine, he was quashing dissent by calling people

"nervous Nellies." So it seems to me that he has got remarkable control.

You know, Humphrey was out there on the stump for three weeks and he had to recant on four different things. Nixon has been President-elect for a week, and he made that statement which was just a jumble of words, I think about how he was going to have to be advised and have veto power over the Presidential decisions, which is not what he meant, I don't think, when it came out. But this has really not happened to Johnson. He's very unique in that. You know, you read over Kennedy's press conferences, Eisenhower's press conferences. They read like people talking, which is very hard to follow sometimes. They ramble. With Eisenhower, he was hard to follow even when you heard him. With Kennedy, he had good verbal control so you could follow him while you were listening, but you try to read some of this stuff and it rambles. You read Johnson's stuff, press conference answers, while he may have been boring on television listening to him, he talks in paragraphs. You know, item A, item B, item C, topic sentences. It's really remarkable. He's very, very good that way.

B: I've about run out of questions. Is there anything else we ought to cover?

W: No, I think I'm just about---

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

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