INTERVIEW II

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INTERVIEWEE: EARLE G. WHEELER

INTERVIEWER: DOROTHY PIERCE McSWEENY

PLACE: General Wheeler's office in the Pentagon, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

M: General, we were discussing Vietnam at the end of our last interview, and I would like to conclude that subject with two events in 1968 which have had extensive coverage, the first being the Tet Offensive. I would like to ask you to tell me a little bit about Mr. Johnson's decisions arising from this event and how they were reached, and any disagreement that you might have with the extensive material that's been written about the subject.

W: Well, to start off with, the Tet Offensive began about 31 January 1968. We'd had a great deal of intelligence, captured documents, prisoners of war, defectors, which indicated that starting in early January something sizable was imminent. I recall receiving messages from General Westmoreland outlining various intelligence indicators, which led him to believe that the enemy was going to attempt something of a sizable nature.

First, he was thinking of after Tet; then as I recall it, he was thinking of before Tet, which had happened in previous years. I would say thatno one really expected the enemy to launch the

attack during Tet, because, as you know, this is a very sacred time to all the Vietnamese, North and South. It is a sort of a combination of Christmas, New Year, and Easter. I've been told by Vietnamese or Southeast Asian experts that this period of family reunification or celebration hadn't been violated in over three-hundred years until 1968. So, while we knew something was going to happen, we didn't know exactly when, nor did we know how extensive the attack was going to be. As it turned out, the enemy launched very substantial attacks against most of the provincial capitals and against Saigon itself. They actually managed to introduce sizable forces into the environs of Saigon and into Hue, which is the old capital of Vietnam and in which is located the most sacred pagoda in all of Vietnam.

Now, the interesting part historically, it seems to me, of the Tet Offensive, is the fact that while it was militarily a very substantial defeat for the North Vietnamese or the Viet Cong, it was turned into a propaganda victory for the North Vietnamese here in the United States. And I attribute this primarily to the press coverage at that time and to the dissident groups here in the United States, who were following the Hanoi line and had been before that.

I went out to Vietnam late in February, about the twenty-fourth, at the direction of President Johnson, to survey the situation and ascertain the facts and to make any recommendations that I saw fit to make. When I got there I conferred with General Westmoreland

and all of the senior commanders at various times. I, of course, conferred with Ambassador [Ellsworth] Bunker and the mission staff. As you recall, the embassy had been attacked, and, as an illustration of the accuracy of the press coverage, the allegation was made that the Viet Cong had actually entered the embassy, which they did not do. They got in the embassy grounds through the wall, but they did not get into the embassy at all. I also had long conversations with General [Cao Van] Vien, the Chief of the Vietnamese Joint General Staff, with President [Nguyen Van] Thieu, and with Vice President [Nguyen Cao] Ky.

Now, the situation I found was this: it being Tet, a substantial number of the South Vietnamese units were only at half strength, because, following the Vietnamese tradition, they had returned to their homes on leave for the Tet holidays. The propaganda put out by the enemy, the captured PWs, defectors, and captured documents made very clear what the enemy objectives were. And they apparently had believed they could achieve these objectives. First, they wanted to fragment and destroy the South Vietnamese armed forces. Secondly, they wanted to instigate uprisings in the major population areas against the government. Thirdly, they wanted to destroy our logistic base and our command and control system, and they had actually made a very sizable attack against Tan Son Nhut Air Base where our command headquarters was located.

The situation was complicated by the fact that, of course, we were holding the outpost up at Khe Sanh, and there had been a lot

of very adverse publicity about that here in the United States, with comparisons being made to Dien Bien Phu and things like that.

Now, General Westmoreland was well aware of the very, very heavy casualties that had been inflicted on the enemy. He was aware that the Vietnamese forces in general had remained intact and had fought extremely well. This included even some of the regional forces, of the popular forces, who are paramilitary and not regular forces. He was also aware that up until that time, about February 24-26, the Vietnamese government had not fallen apart at all. However, the enemy was propagandizing that they were going to undertake a so-called second wave of attacks. What he didn't know was: one, whether the South Vietnamese government would remain stable, could retain control if there was a second wave of attacks; secondly, whether the South Vietnamese armed forces would remain intact and able to fight; and, of course, thirdly, he had on his mind the problems connected with Khe Sanh, Northern I Corps, the battle that was going on in Hue, and so on.

This situation was further compounded by the fact that he did not know what had happened to the pacification program out in the hinterlands. We were getting very gloomy reports based upon what we learned later to be fragmentary information, in most instances greatly exaggerated and inaccurate because the enemy did not target the pacification program. He was going after the main population centers. He had already set his objectives, and this

is probably where he made a mistake, a mistake at least.

General Westmoreland had had to move forces from the South, that is from Second and Third Corps, to the north, up into the Danang and Hue area, and along into the DMZ area--this is in "I" [First] Corps--in order to get a proper balance of force within the country. And he had absolutely no reserve, none. He had not a single American unit, nor was there a single Vietnamese unit that was not committed. Therefore if there came a second wave of attacks and if the Vietnamese forces began to disintegrate, he would have been left in a rather precarious position.

One further point that's perfectly clear: His troop ceiling at that time was 525,000. He had never received over 500,000, and we still owed him, you might say, another 25,000 troops. We had started to reinforce him in early February, with the Third Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division, and with the 27th Marine Regimental Landing Team. And, of course, when they arrived it gave him additional flexibility.

So we discussed the situation at some length. Now, I had in the back of my mind a couple of other things. One, we had had an attack on the Blue House, the President's Palace in South Korea, in January. We'd had the capture of the [USS] Pueblo in late January, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff here were greatly concerned about those incidents, which had required us to deploy a very substantial number of American fighter bomber units, tactical

aircraft, to Korea in order to redress the imbalance between the South Korean Air Force and North Korean Air Force. And we were unaware of what was going to happen.

Our strategic reserve here in the United States was completely depleted. We had not a single unit that, under the criteria that we had established, that is, one year in country, two to two and a half years back here in the United States, was deployable. Not one that could be sent to Vietnam. The one that was closest to being ready was the Fifth Mechanized Division, Army, and it couldn't be ready even with one brigade for a period of about, oh, six to eight [or] ten weeks. They were still in training.

In discussing the situation with General Westmoreland and, as I say, his commanders and staff, we worked up a proposal in terms of units now, because we weren't thinking in terms of men and numbers that would have provided him as soon as we could get it to him. He said he would like to have it in May--one division. And then we should prepare ourselves for future eventualities by having another division which would be deployable sometime in early September. And, as a matter of prudence, we would have a third division, which possibly could have been deployed, in, let's say, December of 1968.

Those are the proposals that I brought back with me from South Vietnam. I stopped in Honolulu and conferred with Admiral [U.S.G.] Sharp [commander-in-chief, Pacific] and his people. We went over

the whole program. I had told General Westmoreland that I did not believe it was humanly possible to provide him a full division as early as May, this could not be done, that we didn't have the forces to do it, but that we would see what we could provide. I stopped in Honolulu, as I say, to confer with Admiral Sharp and his people, and we began to work the problem then, as to units, call-up of reserves, increases in the draft, and all the rest of it.

Then when I got back here, I gave the Joint Chiefs of Staff a briefing, and we began to work the problem. I also briefed the President and the pertinent members of his Cabinet and certain congressional leaders.

Now, President Johnson at that time decided to establish this review group, a committee, or whatever you want to call it, which would be headed by Mr. Clark Clifford, who was then the secretary-designate of Defense, and which would have as members, of course, Mr. McNamara, as long as he remained around, Secretary Rusk, Mr. Helms of the CIA, myself, General Max Taylor, and there were two or three others. I think Nick Katzenbach sat in from time to time, also.

As I say, we on the Joint Chiefs of Staff began to work out the details of how to provide or where to get the forces which General Westmoreland and I had conferred about on the time schedule that we had conferred about.

It soon became apparent, from the JCS point of view, that

the only way these forces could be provided in a timely fashion would be by a very substantial call-up of reserves. I believe that this ultimately became the sticking point. Because we called up some reserves but not nearly as many as would have been required to produce the forces we were contemplating, which would have been used: one, to reinforce in Vietnam; two, to re-establish the strategic reserve here in the United States, so that we could meet contingencies either in Vietnam or in Korea or elsewhere--we were having problems in the Middle East, as well, at that time, as you know--and would give us some flexibility.

There were a number of meetings at the White House. Mr. Clifford and I conferred with congressional leadership at great length. The matter of the reserve call-up was very, very onerous for any of these gentlemen to accept, because of the political problem of considerable dimensions and heat. And progressively, what was proposed was whittled down. Now one of the problems, of course, was the fact that certain individuals right here in the Pentagon, at a very early date, leaked all the details of this to the New York Times, as you probably recall. This generated the usual reaction that you get here in the United States, generated by people who are attempting to pre-empt the President and his decisions. And, of course, this put Mr. Johnson under tremendous political pressure from various pressure groups. I don't think it tied his hands by any manner or means, but certainly must have had some influence on the decisions that were eventually made.

M: Would you care to give the names of those people?

W: No, I happen to know the name of at least one that I have on good authority, but I'm not going to name him. I'll let the son-of-a-bitch stew in his own juice, if you'll excuse the expression. He has been very forthcoming with his own ideas on this subject, I might add.

So, anyway, we looked over the whole package. And after much discussion at the higher levels of government, it was decided that we simply could not go as far down the road for political and for fiscal reasons as would have been required to meet the overall program that had been laid out.

Now in military parlance, what I brought back was a contingency plan. In other words, the only firm request that Westmoreland really made was for the first increment; the second and third increments would have been deployed only on the decision of the President, in the light of circumstances that prevailed at the time.

So, we finally came down with the thought that what we should do was, one, to give him the troop units that we still owed him; in other words, bring him up to 525,000. In addition, we worked out a package that amounted to another 24,500 support troops of various kinds, which would have made his troop ceiling 549,500. Then, I flew out to Clark Air Force Base in the Phillippines on the twenty-fourth of March, and I met with General Westmoreland and discussed this whole thing with him most of one night.

He told me that this was entirely satisfactory to him, recognizing the problems here in the United States. And his reasons were these: first, the second wave of attacks had not eventuated. What had happened was that the North Vietnamese and the VC [Viet Cong] had taken, really, a terrific military defeat. Their losses had been tremendous. Moreover, in the process of generating this offensive, they had surfaced a considerable number, in fact the majority, of the VC infrastructure, the political leaders and the military leaders and so on, and they had either been killed or captured during the course of the offensive. The pacification program had suffered a setback in several areas, but nothing nearly as bad as had been reported and feared at the time. The ARVN [Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam] was stronger; they had gained assurance from the fact that they had withstood the North Vietnamese. And the Vietnamese government was in a stronger position than they had ever been. And this was evidenced by the fact that we had been urging upon them a general mobilization before this and they had never felt politically strong enough to do it.

Westmoreland likened the Tet Offensive to being the Battle of the Bulge insofar as the North Vietnamese and VC were concerned; in other words, they shot their wad on that. Militarily, they were never able to do anything much of a sizable nature after that. And he said, as far as the South Vietnamese were concerned, it was sort of like Pearl Harbor, because it really awakened the people

and the government and got them off the dime and moving ahead in order to, you might say, protect themselves. The South Vietnamese people also were extremely angry at the VC, because they had violated Tet, and [also at] the North Vietnamese. You see, this was really a traumatic experience for them from the religious point of view, the family point of view, and so on. Also, whereas in the past the VC had posed as being the great liberators and protectors of the people, they murdered people right and left, as you probably know. At least three thousand civilians were lined up, up near Hue, and either killed or buried alive in mass graves. We found them, and the South Vietnamese knew all of this, and many people who before had either been lukewarm or had given credence of the VC playing to be the protectors of the people no longer believed them.

So that's the story of the Tet Offensive. In other words, Westmoreland said he was perfectly satisfied with the 549,500, that he could do the job, and he could carry on because of the changed situation.

One further item, before I leave this: Also he was in the process at the time--you see, Hue had been recaptured, liberated, by that time--of mounting an operation to relieve Khe Sanh, which he did in early April. Then he was going to move into the A Shau Valley, which is a VC stronghold on the border of Laos in South Vietnam, and clean it out, because it had been the source of a lot of the supplies and many of the troops that had been used on

Northern I Corps against Hue.

So that is the story of the two-hundred-thousand of the Tet Offensive.

M: General, you've gone into part of my second question, which was the 1968 policy review. But I wanted to bring it up to the result of the review, which was President Johnson's March 31 speech, and the military decision at that time of the troop ceiling and the restriction of the bombing.

W: The troop ceiling was established at 549,500 I would say, about, oh, I met with Westmoreland on the twenty-fourth of March. The final decision on that troop ceiling and what we could and would provide was made perhaps the twentieth of March, or the nineteenth, something like that, before I went to Vietnam. I was only gone a day and a half. I flew out to the Phillippines and flew right back. Then when I got back, I found that there was discussion going on about a partial bombing halt, to the 20th parallel. There's a great deal of discussion about this. From the military aspect, the JCS had to agree that insofar as affecting the situation in South Vietnam substantially, a bombing halt on March 31 would have very little influence on the battlefield operations in the South. The reason being that the weather at that time of the year in North Vietnam is atrocious, and you just can't do any decent bombing anyway. So it would have very little effect one way or the other. Now, what led President Johnson to this, I do not know.

M: Is there a great extreme here, sir, in polarization, between

the military and civilians?

W: Well, President Johnson has told me that Dean Rusk was the man who first advanced the idea of a partial bombing halt as an effort to get negotiations started. I know that other people have advanced the idea that they were the heroes who thought of this. I'll let anybody who wants to have the credit for it. I did not suggest it; this I know.

M: Did you see a great effort to sway the President's mind?

W: No, because I was gone during a part of the time that this was going on. I think that by the time I returned and it was first broached to me, he had already made up his mind that he would make this offer in his speech of March 31. Or, at least, [he] had almost made up his mind. The first time that I discussed it with him face to face was in company with General Abrams, whom I brought back with me from Clark Air Force Base, because he was going to relieve General Westmoreland when Westmoreland became chief of staff of the Army in July of 1968. President Johnson asked our opinion, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Abrams and General Westmoreland, as to what the effect would be. And we had, in all honesty, to tell him it would have very little effect on what happened in South Vietnam.

M: I'm thinking of something else that went through my mind. Let me continue on with the last part of the President's speech, in which he withdrew from re-election. Did you have any indication of this before that announcement?

W: I can't honestly say that I did. The only thing that I recall that struck me at the time--because I was present at some of the drafting sessions on his speech, to include the night before he made it--I could tell that he was in more of a swivet than I had ever seen him before in my life. He was really very much concerned about something; his manner was completely different than it usually was. He was obviously upset emotionally and, I would say, mentally. As I say, this was not his usual demeanor, and I thought to myself at the time that he was just awfully tired. I knew he was tired; he was damn near exhausted, as a matter of fact. An interesting sidelight is that, I guess it was Sunday preceding his speech, they sent me the final draft, but it had no ending. The ending, he had reserved for himself to give; he told me this later. Reserved for himself to give. In other words, he had waited until the very last moment, so there would be no leaks, to put down on a piece of paper his statement that he would not seek re-election.

M: I know what I was thinking before, General, but it ties in with this. Do you think that this decision on the part of Mr. Johnson and the sort of turning the corner of the Vietnam War in the speech of March 31 in setting these various limitations or restrictions resulted from the propaganda victories of Tet? Or was it just the time sequence?

W: No, I'll tell you, I think his decision was something he had been considering for a long time. The reason is that you could actually

see him getting older by the month during the four years after he was elected president. He worked terrifically hard, and I mean this--terrific worker! Apparently he was greatly worried about the dissent in the country, what was going on in the country, the problems of dealing with various world situations that kept hitting him in the face. I also believe that Mrs. Johnson was worried about his health. As you know, he suffered a very serious heart attack in 1956, and he wasn't exactly leading the kind of life that a man who has had a serious heart attack should be leading. And I have an idea, in fact I know from what he has told me since that he had been giving consideration to this for well over a year. In other words, it was a recurring theme.

I think he may have even discussed it with certain of his very close friends. I also know that when General Westmoreland was back here I think it was late in November of 1967, he asked General Westmoreland if he were not re-elected president, would this have any ill effect on the morale of the troops. And Westmoreland said that he thought that the troops would understand, that it wouldn't have any profound effect. Of course, this was all conjectural; I mean, he was talking to Westmoreland, he didn't tell Westmoreland, "This is what I'm going to do." He was just talking about the morale of the troops in general and prospects of the future and things like that.

M: Before we close that subject, just quickly, are there any discrepancies you recall with what has now been written about these

subjects and as you saw them yourself?

W: Well, there certainly is a discrepancy about the number of troops and the terms in which the request was made. There is a very vast discrepancy there, of course.

M: Yes, you have made that one clear. I'm sorry. Are there any others?

W: Certainly, the stories that were written about what had happened in South Vietnam as compared as to what had really happened. There is no resemblance of truth in the stories that were written and what actually went on. So that these are two areas that strike me as being within my own confidence to comment on.

M: Let me go a little bit forward, to Mr. Johnson himself on the presidency. Anything he might have told you on that? And then, if there is any other time, I might get back to another question. What I am thinking of is in terms of how you saw the procedure that was followed at the White House and any comments Mr. Johnson made himself about the presidency or his presidency. It's a very broad question, and you can pick up where you see fit.

W: Mr. Johnson was used to operating in the congressional way. In other words, in dealing with a group, a relatively small group of senior senators, [he was used to dealing] by personal persuasion, and argumentation, and as he said, talking things out, arriving at a decision and then going ahead and pushing it through to legislation, as might be required. So he operated when he was President very much in that same manner. The National Security Council meetings were held, of course, but he never really presented

there or discussed there the major questions having to do with Vietnam. They were reserved, very generally, for the Tuesday Luncheons. And, as you probably know, the regular attendants at those luncheons were Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, later Secretary Clifford, myself, Dick Helms. Usually George Christian would sit in, but he was the press secretary, [and he met] purely so that he would be aware of what was going on. Walt Rostow, and, occasionally, Vice President Humphrey would attend. From time to time, Justice Fortas would attend. Before he was secretary of defense, occasionally, Clark Clifford would attend. And, occasionally, General Max Taylor would attend. As I say, the regular attendees were the smaller group that I've just mentioned. And it was there that we thrashed out, you might say, the details of and the decisions as to what was going to be done in regard to the war in Vietnam. Now, at that same time, however, at these same luncheons, he opened up much broader subjects than the war in Vietnam. He would discuss other problems, too, domestic and foreign affairs, because the Secretary of State was there. So that it would be a pretty wide ranging conversation. It was from these meetings, I think that he derived the information that gave him the bases for many of the decisions that he took.

M: Did this informality cause any difficulty in terms of the decision that was being reached, or had it been reached, or necessary information on the subject?

W: No, at least not on the military side. I always, of course, at the first opportunity after, which would be Wednesday, normally--the chiefs normally meet on Wednesday afternoon--I would always debrief them as to what went on insofar as it affected the military. I didn't get into other domestic problems and so on; it wasn't our business. If it had something to do with our business, why, of course I would mention it to him. So we had no problem in keeping up with him. It may have caused problems in the other departments of the government. I'm not so sure.

M: How would you rate is kind of a wrong word to use, but, in order of their recurrence, the subjects that were covered in the Tuesday Luncheons. I would assume Vietnam would be probably the one that was foremost.

W: Vietnam was foremost. We always talked about Vietnam. There's no question about that. The other subjects would range right across the board from domestic politics to domestic problems: the budget, foreign policy problems, such as those caused by the Arab-Israeli war or the Arab-Israeli confrontation before the Arab-Israeli war, the problems having to do with North Korea and South Korea. You name it; it was discussed.

M: Okay. How would you describe the impact of the Vietnam War on Mr. Johnson?

W: Well, it was a very harrowing experience for him. For one thing, I am convinced that he wanted to go down in history as a "peace

president"who devoted his time and his energies to development within the United States. This was absolutely sincere on his part. So he found himself a "war president" and, incidentally, in a very difficult time to be a war president, because of the dissent in the United States. This, of course, was particularly abrasive to him. It was not a congenial atmosphere for him to live in.

Now, I know that some people have doubted his sincerity on many things. I personally don't doubt his sincerity on this at all. And I must say that I spent more hours than I can remember of my life talking to him on subjects related to the war in Vietnam.

M: How would you describe Mr. Johnson's strengths and weaknesses?

W: Well, his strength is the fact that he is a very determined man, and actually a very dedicated individual, dedicated to the well-being of the United States. He also, due to his long service in Congress, understood precisely how to deal with the Congress. He not only knew many of them well, but had known them well for many years, they were personal friends. But, even more than that, he understood the sensitive spots in congressional-executive branch relationships and was able to deal with these very effectively. This was a tremendous advantage to him in getting his programs through. He took great pride, and I think rightly so, that, in the remnant of President John Kennedy's office, after Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, he, Johnson, put through all of the legislative programs which Mr. Kennedy had been unable to get

through the Congress during his tenure as president. And this, I believe, was due to his own political astuteness and political ability to deal with the Congress and the congressional leadership.

His greatest weakness will probably sound odd to you. This is the fact that he does not project well as a speaker. Either on the public platform, on the TV, or the radio. He simply cannot project his own sincerity and his firm beliefs in various things. They just don't come through. At least, they don't to me, and they don't to a great many other people that I have talked to.

M: Did he discuss that with you, sir?

W: Never, never. Except I know that he got to be a better speaker towards the end of his term than he was at the beginning, so I know that he was working at improving his ability to project. Now, the odd part of this is that in a small gathering--I'm speaking now of anywhere from four to twelve people--he made an entirely different impression, entirely different. You realized when you were in this small group listening to him that here was a man of character and strength. It just came right out and hit you in the face. And yet, over the TV tube, it didn't come out at all. He is a very remarkable man; he is an unusual man; he's a very sensitive man; and this is something a lot of people don't give him credit for, either. As I say, in my judgment, his greatest weakness was the fact that he just did not project when he spoke publicly.

M: Are there any conversations that you recall that were really in more of just a personal nature that particularly stand out and

describe the President to you?

W: Well, yes.

M: I hope we didn't cover this before, but if we did, I'd rather do it again than not.

W: I may have told you this before, I'm not sure, Ms. McSweeny. But I was over in Vietnam in July of 1967, and I apparently suffered what they call a silent heart attack, climbing up a hill up near Pleiku one very hot afternoon when I was very tired. In fact, it was picked up on me on a routine physical that I was taking in August, about six or four or five weeks after it had happened.

Of course, I was in the hospital for a couple of weeks. They let me out on convalescent leave. When I got out, I went to see President Johnson. I told him what my physical condition was and what the prognosis was and so on, and the fact that I was going to be out of action for at least another six weeks, and it could be considerably more than that. I suggested to him that I should retire and that he should appoint somebody else as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Well, he talked to me about forty-five minutes, finally he said to me, "Now, Buz," he said,--Buz was what he always called me-- "You just go along and do what the doctors tell you to do to improve your health. I don't want anybody else as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff." He said, "But, on the other hand, I don't want you to kill yourself in that job. After you've had another checkup in about six weeks or so, if the doctors say you

can do the job," he said, "then I want you to stay on." Then--we were in his office, this was about seven-thirty or so at night--he got up, and walked to the door with me, and put his arm around my shoulder, and said, "I can't afford to lose you. You have never given me a bad piece of advice." I don't know whether that's about President Johnson or about Wheeler!

M: Either one is fine. General, I'm losing the time, of course, to go on. Do you think we better cut it here?

W: What other questions do you have?

M: Of course, there's the military advice to the President. I was going to get in the broadest question I possibly could about the Middle East and the Dominican intervention.

W: I can answer both of those very quickly. Insofar as the Middle East goes, this is the war of 1967, of course, the Israelis, as you would expect, were pressing very hard for additional military assistance, in the form of aircraft, et cetera, and, you might say, commitment on the part of the United States that we were going to back them up to the hilt. Well, my part in this was relatively simple, because President Johnson asked me at the end of one of these meetings what our estimate was as to the relative ability of the two sides. I told him that our best estimate was that if there were a war, that the Israelis would win it in five to seven days. He asked me to go back and check this out and talk to him about it again. I did, and I came back and told him exactly the same thing--that there's just no question; that the way the two

sides lined up in the air and on the ground, the Israelis would win; that if the Israelis pre-empted the UAR, the war would be shorter and their losses would be less than if the contrary happened and the Arabs had pre-empted the Israelis. This turned out to be reasonably correct, as you probably recall.

On the Dominican Republic, there it was a question of whether or not we should intervene, and largely the problem centered around the political aspects, and also the intelligence, as to whether or not this was a Communist inspired movement, rather than being, as some people in the United States would have it, merely an uprising of honest citizens who were highly indignant at what was going on in their country. I took part in all of those discussions. The President finally made the decision to intervene, and then it was a matter of merely getting the forces, organizing them, moving them, getting them the proper orders, and so on. I recall there was some criticism, because we put about twenty thousand troops in there, which some people said was too many. My only response to that was that you could never have too many. If you can overawe the enemy by a show of force, your casualties are going to be less. We could have probably done the job with fewer forces, but it probably would have cost us more in terms of lives than it did.

M: So you did see evidence of some sort of Communist influence in the Dominican Republic?

W: No question about it.

M: What about the Soviet threat in the Middle East War?

W: Communist threat? Well, the Communist involvement in that was Soviet backing of the radical Arab states. You will recall that we, that is,the United States, were trying desperately to get a diplomatic solution to that war. We were meeting all sorts of resistance. There's no question but what the various, substantial Soviet backing given to the UAR, in particular, gave Nassar the feeling that he could push ahead.

M: Any worry about intervention on the part of the Soviet Union?

W: Not particularly. I never had any, because I didn't think that they would. It's contrary to their practice to intervene in things like that. Of course, this is something you have to take into account. But it wasn't anything that really worried me a great deal.

M: How did Mr. Johnson act under these two particular crisis situations, as you recall?

W: I would say that he was deeply concerned, he was very firm on both occasions, and knew very clearly what he was and was not going to do. In other words, he--

M: How had he reached that position?

W: Well, he had sat down and talked to various people. He's a great one, you know, for talking to people. He talks to people all over the country by telephone; he gets in groups of people in the White House and talks to them. He talks to all of his normal advisors, and he finally makes up his mind if this is the thing to

do, and he goes at it.

One other aspect, you asked me about strengths and weaknesses a while ago. I'll tell you another strength of his. He asks very intelligent questions and very difficult questions on occasion to answer. Because if you are talking to him and you are sort of dealing in generalities, he has a habit of waiting until you get through, and he says, "And so what?" In other words, "What is your conclusion? What is your recommendation?" So as I say, he asks very intelligent questions, and sometimes very difficult questions.

M: Do you recall any particular incidents of that?

W: On a number of occasions. Nothing specific. I mean, it was just that you could never get by with a generality. You had to come down and say, "This leads me to the following conclusion."

M: On the Middle East and the Dominican intervention, is there anything you could just conclude with on that? Or have we covered that?

W: No, I think that nothing stands out in my mind other than the fact that Mr. Johnson was determined, if possible, to avert a war in the Middle East. And he was also determined, as far as the Dominican Republic goes, that he was not going to see another island in the Caribbean become communist. Those two things.

M: General, I must thank you very much for your help and conclude here.

W: Okay, not at all.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

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June White
Donor

Dec. 13, 1976
Date

acting James E. O'Neill
Archivist of the United States

December 30, 1976
Date

INTERVIEW I

DATE: FEBRUARY 17, 1976

INTERVIEWEE: MRS. WILLIAM S. (JUNE) WHITE

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: At Mrs. White's home in Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: Let's begin with your background. You're from Massachusetts?

W: I'm from Massachusetts and went to Washington in 1944 as a correspondent for the Boston Herald, at which point I met President Roosevelt, who was simply wonderful to me. Later I met Harry Truman. Then I married Bill and stopped working.

G: You became a housewife.

W: I became a housewife, yes, but a very committed housewife as far as Washington was concerned. I was fascinated, followed the press very closely, very interested in what Bill was writing, very interested in the personalities there. I felt that I had a terrific life, was very gung ho for the country, believed in it and still do, believed in most of the men I knew there, and [was] not disillusioned like so many. In fact I feel I had an absolutely unheard-of opportunity. Appreciate it very much.

G: Do you recall the first year that you became acquainted with Lyndon Johnson?

W: It was the very end of 1946 when I started to know him. I remember being overwhelmed by him because he was so relaxed and so outgoing, and I had been brought up in a more inhibited environment. Texans on the whole are more relaxed, I would say, than Easterners. I was very, very impressed by him,

thought his energy was overwhelming. The two things I was impressed by when I first met him were his energy and his humor; he made me laugh, if not aloud, inside.

G: What was his humor like in those days?

W: His mimicry of people and his descriptions of other people in the Senate, all of whom I had met and knew; and in a sympathetic sense. He was very, very excited to be where he was. Of course, this was later in'48, not '46. Even then when he first began, as I remember it, his understanding of the rules and how to pass legislation--from the beginning he was very, very impressive and very much admired by me.

G: Was it noticeable then that he had several mentors like Sam Rayburn and Senator Alvin Wirtz?

W: I have only really learned about Wirtz much later. And when I was with Sam Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson, I never really saw that Sam Rayburn was his mentor. I always thought that Lyndon Johnson was the overwhelming--I did. I realize that possibly that was so, but when I saw them together I never did really have that impression.

G: Why was this?

W: Because I think I thought that Lyndon Johnson was smarter, and as I recall it he was much more vocal. I did not think of Sam Rayburn in terms of his mentor. I was very impressed with Sam Rayburn, loved him, but I did not see that mentor-student bit even then.

G. Was there any deference paid to the Speaker because of his age or anything?

W: Well, there was warmth there, but I recall it more as equals than mentor and [student]. I may be wrong about that. Oh, there was great warmth and respect. My recollection is that Lyndon Johnson grasped things very, very quickly, and it's obvious the way his career went up in the Senate that he did. Of course, Sam Rayburn always kidded about--you know, the House was 'it' to him. If he had been Lyndon Johnson's mentor, it seems to me he would have mentored him to stay in the House. Maybe not.

G: Well, there must have been a certain competition, each representing a different house of the Congress.

W: Perhaps. I don't know about the really fine points of that one. Certainly I never noticed competition between them. I suppose in a sense, certainly when the children were around and to everyone there, Sam Rayburn perhaps was a little bit of a father figure because he was more advanced in age. They were all in a sense father figures to me because everyone was fifteen years older than I was. I didn't feel that Sam Rayburn was a mentor, but perhaps he was--any more than say Lyndon Johnson was a mentor. Maybe I saw them both as mentors. But it seemed to me they had very free exchange. I'm sure that Lyndon Johnson must have been very exciting to Sam Rayburn. After all, he was younger, and he understood so instantly the legislative process, which was unusual for a new young man.

G: Did it seem that Lyndon Johnson was working longer hours than some of the other senators?

W: Oh, there is no doubt that he expended much more energy, in fact, all those years, which is one thing I really wish could be gone into some time: the working hours. One had the feeling that he was always working.

G: What about in the evenings?

W: Even the social exchange. It was social in that everyone was involved socially at a dinner party, but everyone was also involved in the same work in one form or another.

G: If he were out to dinner or at a party of something, would he need to stop and make phone calls or continue some of the things he had been working on during the day?

W: Are you speaking now of those early days?

G: The Senate years, yes.

W: Oh, the phone would ring, but I don't remember his dinner being interrupted too often. There were people there; he was polite about it. But you felt that he was always thinking of what he was going to attempt to do and that he had a great many things he wanted to do.

G: You got the feeling that his work--

W: I got the feeling that he had a life's plan. I am speaking more of legislation than of ambition for Lyndon Johnson.

G: Did you view him as a political liberal then, or a Southerner or a conservative?

W: I think in those early days I viewed him probably as in the middle of the road, although certainly because he used to tease Bill about some of his ideas, I knew that he was interested in doing things for people, which was certainly a

liberal objective. But I didn't view him as too far liberal. Common sense is what I thought he had.

G: Did he seem at all a populist?

W: I think my husband was the first one that wrote and used that phrase about 'populist," so I guess I would have to agree with it.

G: Why would you agree?

W: Because I am inclined to agree with a great deal of my husband's writings and particularly a great many of his conclusions about President Johnson. And he was a populist in the sense that there's no doubt he wanted to do a great deal, I think, for people and I think he always did. I think it's probably one of the tragedies of the Vietnam war, and I'm sure he must have felt that he had done a great deal for people. One thing that I was thinking of this morning is that I remember that last year when things were really pressing in Vietnam how often he was talking about Joe Califano. I was thinking this morning that the reason he was doing it [was] because he was saying, "Well, there are other things going on that are very, very positive."

G: The domestic programs. Did you get a feel for his foreign policy attitudes during the 1950's?

W: He was very internationalist, and I think he definitely himself even then always believed that the President should be supported on foreign policy.

G: Very much a bipartisan foreign policy.

W: Oh, absolutely bipartisan and always very positive when he

could be about helping.

G: Anything else here in the Senate period that you recall?

WL Well, I recall one amusing anecdote at a party--mentioning the social thing--at our house when he was Majority Leader working very hard. Dean Acheson, who had been the previous Secretary of State--was not now Secretary of State--it must have been during the Eisenhower years--stood up and gave a toast. It was a birthday party for Bill. He said, "Well, I see we have the keeper of the zoo here," meaning the Majority Leader of the Senate. And how appalled we all were.

To go on with it, the next morning Mr. Acheson came over about nine o'clock and apologized. It was really just for different attitudes. That was one Secretary of State's attitude toward the Congress. I was very devoted to Dean Acheson, but he could be quite impossible and quite arrogant. And [I remember] how gracefully also Mr. Johnson handled it.

G: How did he handle it?

W: He handled it with a laugh. And Mr. Rayburn was there, too, so it was quite a little group for Mr. Acheson to take on. He was out of office. It was quite rude of him. No, everyone laughed and just thought he was being impossible. I'm just throwing that in for the record that Mr. Johnson could have a sense of humor very often on things like that.

G: He was a very persuasive man, however.

W: Mr. Johnson?

G: I know that he could really talk people--

W: Oh, he could blow your mind with persuasion. I saw him do

that to any number of people.

G: Can you recall a particular occasion?

W: The Johnson treatment?

G: Yes.

W: Turn it off a minute and just let me think.

(Pause in recording)

G: Let's talk some more about the Johnson treatment and his ability to persuade people.

W: I think one thing--and I saw this often, if I can think of explicits--is that he could read people almost on meeting them. Therefore it's almost as though he knew their assets, their plusses and their negative points, so that he could go, I think, to their plus points and use them, even helping them to use themselves to their best advantage. And he knew a person's vanity it seems to me almost instantly, or as they would say today a tie-up. Therefore he could bring out the person through either humor or nudging or whatever it was. When you were with him as often as I was, you could see him doing it. I saw him do it any number of times in the White House. Now let me think; you want more explicit. But I didn't look on it so much as wheeling and dealing or that type of thing as I did an innate sense of understanding people's assets.

G: You were mentioning John Chancellor.

W: Well with John Chancellor I saw him doing it. I think he wanted John Chancellor to go to work for Voice of America. so he had him to Camp David, and he gave him the charm, the

humor. I remember because we stayed up while President Johnson talked of his entire life. He had almost complete recall. It was a fascinating night. Finally Bill and I did go to bed, but it was very late in the morning. Nobody could have withstood this enticement to go to work because it was such a fascinating, charming evening. And I think another thing: President Johnson's recall--look at mine; it's obviously not good in the explicits, but his was fantastic.

G: What sorts of things did he talk about?

W: Well, that night he talked about just his whole life. You know, you saw it on the screen, really explicit. Just complete recall, that's what I remembered, and in a fascinating sense, impressions weaving in and out, humor weaving in and out. He was in a very, very good mood. There was no greater experience in life than spending time like this with Lyndon Johnson. It was an experience, a happening. You could see people, particularly when they were meeting him for the first time, just be charmed out of their wits. I always laughed when people at one point were saying he wasn't an intellectual, because it seemed to me he was so completely one. He conceived so much great legislation. He had this tremendous recall; he never fumbled with budget figures. I used to laugh because of the snobbery in this area. I happen to have known Dean Acheson very well, who the intellectuals did love and seemed to understand. I knew him very well, very well. I never came to the conclusion

that [Dean Acheson] was brighter, even intellectually. He had different interests. But I myself became annoyed because I don't think that it was a fair judgment. It wasn't a well-thought-out judgment on people's behalf. It was a different expertise, perhaps. But Lyndon Johnson had a fantastic mind, really.

G: Do you recall him using the Johnson treatment on other senators? Did you ever witness that?

W: Well actually when I was around the senators . . . I 'm sure he did use it. But the senators who were closest to us were the Russells and the Tafts and the Stennises, and they were senior senators. Some of them, of course, were older than Lyndon Johnson. So that was a more subtle thing. I'm sure he did. Frankly they had already loved and endorsed him and appreciated him or he wouldn't have become Majority Leader, as far as Dick Russell is concerned. So he was more contained. I think his treatment, probably, was after he became Majority Leader and younger senators came in. Rather, he didn't come on quite that gung ho with the older, inner club members, I'm sure. I mean, he approached them probably in a slightly different fashion than he later approached the younger, newer senators.

G: Any reflections on the 1960 campaign?

W: I remember he worked very hard. I remember his coming over to our house one night. He was very tired and he was working very hard, and I know at one point in there he caught a cold. This is not new: I think he put everything he had into it.

But nothing explicit.

G: Anything particular about the '60 convention?

W: I wasn't at the '60 convention.

G: Did you ever hear him talk about it?

W: Well, he told the story that's well told, how he was approached for the vice-presidency. I've heard that from any number of people, all different, so I just don't know. I was myself surprised about the '60 convention. I remember my husband calling me from the convention. He was outraged because the bosses had run it and Kennedy had become the nominee. He himself thought at this point that Lyndon Johnson had been very badly treated. I believe Bill returned to Washington without knowing [LBJ] was on the ticket.

G: Is there anything during the vice-presidential years that you want to add?

W: Well, I remember a great deal of mockery about him as Vice President. I do remember that, and I remember a lot of sarcasm. It must have been a rough period. As I say, we weren't seeing as much of them then, not that we didn't want to, but because of the anecdote that I told you earlier.

G: Do you want to put that on tape, because I don't think we have that at all.

W: All right. I did not know this until after Lyndon Johnson was out of the White House. My husband told me this story that he had gone by one day to see him in the Vice President's office. The Vice President said to Bill that he thought that they shouldn't see so much of each other because he

thought that he might have to take the responsibility with Kennedy for something which Bill wrote. Where it wouldn't have been his responsibility but that Kennedy might misinterpret it. I think he had, in my opinion, a difficult time as Vice President. I may be wrong. I know that I myself heard many slurs about it all. It must have been a difficult time from the attitude of not the President himself but the people around him who tried to make friction.

G. Do you recall the first time you saw him after the assassination?

W: Yes, I do. I saw him over at The Elms about two days, I think, after he got back. He sent a car for us to make it easier because of the Secret Service. Abe and Carol Fortas were there and Homer Thornberry. He was talking about the assassination and what he could do to look into it for the country's sake. He was terribly calm, I thought, very presidential. I had been worried and concerned about both the President and Bird, and I was very proud of them. Because obviously they had gone through three days of extreme emotion by the time we got there, and they were very self-contained and very concerned about other people and, obviously first of all, the country. It seemed to me that they had already almost taken on a greater strength in some way.

G: Did he talk about his plans for the presidency that evening?

W: No, I think he did not. I think he had too many things that had to be decided right then, that he couldn't project what

he was going to do as President.

G: Did he generally ask you and your husband for advice in times like this?

W: Well, he certainly didn't ask for my advice. I think occasionally he would ask Bill for his opinions and Bill would give an opinion.

G: In this process, when he would ask someone for a view, would he then generally counter that with arguments why it should not prevail?

W: Yes, he would. I think though, as Bill has often written, he really used him--I saw it myself--as a. . . . I think he listened to more advice than it is understood that he listened to advice. He would take the trouble to explain how he felt and why he was doing things, yes.

G: Who else did he see in this context? You mentioned Abe Fortas and his wife. Were these frequent visitors as far as--

W: Well, I don't know how frequent they were. You know, they may have been there six nights a week. How do I know? I saw them there very often, frankly, for the whole time. We knew Abe Fortas for a long time.

G: What I'm trying to do is get an idea who he tended to rely on for advice.

W: I think he relied, at least for a long time, very much on Abe Fortas and very much on Clark Clifford. That was my impression.

G: Did he seek primarily legal advice from them? Was it of a legal nature, or was it often times generally . . .

W: I don't know. He often made the statement that the two smartest men he knew were Abe Fortas and Clark Clifford. He would say that to me, and I never knew whether he was pulling my leg, saying, "A lot smarter than White, for instance," because he loved to bait me, or whether he actually meant it. Because he would say it smilingly. But he did say that at least ten times within my hearing. He did go around a room and ask several people one night before Clark was made Secretary of Defense. That was the only time he ever asked my opinion that I can remember, asked me what I thought of it and what we thought the country would think of it, would it be a good choice.

G: What was your response?

W: I don't know. I know what I thought. I was going to say, "Well, I don't think the country knows who Clark Clifford is." I didn't think he was that well known in the country. He was in Washington. I don't know if that was my actual response, but I remember that that was what I thought.

G: Let's get your general impressions of him in the White House.

W: My whole disappointment in the White House, the image and all this that goes on, is that I don't think that the American people understand the efforts and the dedication and certainly the hard, hard work of the White House. I don't think they understand the magnitude of the job. Once, speaking of this, I did ask President Johnson, "Do people in your Cabinet understand the proportions of this job? Who does understand it?" Because by then I thought that was

one thing that I understood, having been there. Both Bird and the President would often recite what they had done during the day, and to me it was always so demanding of their energy I was terribly impressed. I wanted the country to understand the magnitude of the job. In any case, he answered that no, he didn't think so because for instance--and he used Joe Fowler, Secretary of the Treasury, as an example. He said, "He has one field which is the Treasury, and if I give him ten minutes he doesn't realize the value of that ten minutes." In other words I think he meant that "they all need more time, but I don't have it to give everyone that much time."

G: Did he give his Cabinet officers a good deal of latitude in terms of making decisions? Were you able to get an idea here?

W: I would not really know about that one. I saw him with people like that. He would talk to them, but how do I know? I wasn't there when he was talking to them about decisions. I know that they were always terribly eager to see him under any occasions, whether it was dinner [or otherwise] and whether or not they had put in then, who would know? My feeling was that he thought they were all working hard and doing a good job, and I felt he felt that about his White House staff. I did see him with the members of the White House staff, and I think he was proud of his White House staff. And appreciative of them; he always was around me. Actually, I have never heard Lyndon Johnson unappreciative of people. He could get quickly burned up and make maybe a

one-sentence remarks. But even people who disagreed with him. . . . I heard Jack Valenti yesterday in this program speaking of [LBJ's] brutality, and obviously other people have said that. I did not see that. I would see him get into a quick-flash temper, but usually I understood why if I knew the circumstances, and if I was there I did know the circumstances. I really did not see that. It has always interested me because I have heard it. I have heard it from people who worked there. But I saw him so much and I did not see that.

G: Let me ask you one question about the Johnson temper. Do you think it was voluntary or involuntary?

W: You mean do I think it was an act?

G: Yes. Did he do it for a purpose to upbraid an employee, to make the employee more responsible or responsive in the future, or did he do it to let off steam?

W: Some other people, I am sure, wouldn't agree if they were the victims of it, but I think it was sometimes a form of even wit and humor. I know one night when I saw his disapproval was when my husband was writing a book about the President and had told him that the title of it was going to be The Professional. Bill Moyers was there, and Bill Moyers was very critical of Bill White and said, "Well I don't like the title. That's no good." And this was an idea where I've seen. . . . Bill Moyers was about to buy a house in Washington. He was working in the White House. The President looked at him quite laconically and said,

"I don't know if I would go looking for that house." I think that [LBJ] did not approve of [Moyer's] interfering in the conversation. He didn't think it was up to him to comment on it, you see. So that was his way of saying, "You're out of step."

G: That's a good story.

W: You know, that kind of humor I saw him do, which I always got a big kick out of, incidentally.

G: Was it ever directed at you?

W: No. He was always marvelous to me.

G: Yes, but I mean this Johnson humor.

W: This Johnson humor? Oh yes. He used to pull gags on me. I had a brunch soon after he was President. I don't recall exactly when. I think it was probably after '64, but it might have been earlier. At The Tavern in Washington. I had it because Bill and I had been rather overwhelmed with invitations, obviously because of our friendship at this point with the Johnsons. I felt very indebted so I decided to have a party. I very casually said to the Johnsons one night at the White House, "I'm having a brunch at The Tavern on Sunday. If you can come, great, but don't feel you have to." Which was always my attitude toward it. I didn't want them to expend themselves in our behalf if they didn't want to come, but on the other hand quite often he would say, "Why don't you do this or that," or Bird would. Then I asked Hubert Humphrey and Muriel also to come, and some of the holdovers from the Kennedy Administration and some of

the Johnson people, all of whom were friends of ours. One thing I think I was really trying to do was to get people together.

I didn't hear a thing and I never mentioned it again. I must have said this two weeks before. I sent out invitations; I did not send the Johnsons one. I never heard from the Humphreys, so finally I called up and asked. The secretary there gave me a great runaround, saying she didn't know whether they would be in town and was very vague about it. So the day of the party, a Sunday, Jack Valenti called up and said, "June, the President is very hurt." I said, "Oh, why is he hurt?" He said, "Because he hasn't been invited to your brunch." And I fell for it. I said, "Oh, that's terrible. I'm really sorry. Tell him he's invited." I really fell for it. You know, he was pulling my leg; he had remembered it. But I felt that maybe they really thought they hadn't been [invited]. So Bill got on the phone, and Bill was worse than I. He said, "Oh, of course you're invited." We thought we had really hurt their feelings.

So we walked in over at The Tavern, still not having heard from the Humphreys and having this long "oh, I'm so hurt job from the President." We got over there and Liz Carpenter was already there, which struck me as a little odd because I was just coming in. But I still didn't catch on. Well anyway, the party got going. It was about half an hour on. All the people had drawn for place cards;

there was no protocol.

Suddenly [there was] this avalanche of noise outside, all the sirens, and it's the President and Bird bringing the Humphreys, with the entire press corps reeling behind. Well, I got in a real panic, but Lloyd Hand [White House Chief of Protocol] was there and handled it. [Johnson] would do things like that, which obviously was a prank. He wanted to bowl me over, first say, "How could you do this to me? You don't invite me to your party?" and then show up with this great parade. It was a marvelous party; everyone had a good time. I think he did, too, which I was glad about.

Another time I invited the President and Bird over to the house during a terrible snow storm. It got to be about eighteen inches, and so everyone was calling. And of course when people came to our house in those days, they always hoped the President would be there. Any friend of the President's they felt that way, not just us. I'm not trying to aggrandize our position at all. It was snowing and people kept calling. I remember Joe Fowler must have called me four times and said, "Well, I just don't know about the snow, whether I can get there." I said, "Don't worry about it, then. Don't make any effort; it doesn't matter." I was just about to call everyone and say, "No way. It's just going to be too inconvenient. Suddenly I looked out the window and there was Norman [the President's chauffeur] shoveling my walk. It was really an amazingly sweet way first of all of getting the walk shoveled, but secondly he

was saying, "I'm going to be there, snow or not."

G: That's good.

W: I call that a prank. That's what I mean when I say--as far as I'm concerned, it was pulling my leg. I remember another night when they came over and brought chili from the White House. He called up and he said, "Well, you won't ask me to dinner, so I'm going to bring White House chili." They came over and I went out and heated the chili. Of course, I set the table and all that. I was nervous, and I didn't serve the chili hot enough. He said, "Damn it, can't you even heat the food I bring?"

Turn it off now.

(Pause in recording)

W: "Hurry, Sundown," that is the name, isn't it, of that movie you mentioned earlier? At the White House one night we went down to see that. Have you seen it?

G: No.

W: Well, my husband took great offense because at the beginning of it they throw a church crucible and break it. So he got up and left the theater. I thought, of course, he had gone out to the men's room. I sat there about half an hour and he didn't come back. Then the President left, and he went upstairs. Bill had gone up to the family quarters and was sitting there having a drink. He was very mad about the movie; he didn't like it a bit. So the President had just waved to him and gone into the bedroom; he knew, of course, he hadn't liked it. The next day when we went over there,

he said, "All my life I have wanted to know what that S. stood for. Now I know: it's William Sundown White." But I always thought it was funny.

G: Did he generally try to relax on the weekends and not do as much work as he would during the week?

W: Well, I can only speak of course of the time I was with him. Actually, when he was on the Sequoia--although there would be people around; usually I would say there were at least six people--he would doze off in this chair. But I always thought that he was thinking, that no way was he sleeping. He was thinking things through, and then after a certain length of time he would come back to the group. I think he used it as relaxation in a sense, but my impression was that he very seldom put the job behind him, certainly not after '66, anyway.

G: He did have a marvelous faculty for being able to sleep upright in a chair, didn't he?

W: Yes. I always questioned whether he was really asleep, though. As I say, I thought he was thinking. He evidently could doze off like that and get refreshed. Sometimes he would literally do it for a couple of hours, and everyone would be very quiet or go to a different part of the Sequoia. I always thought he always was working.

G: Let's talk some more about the man. Did he like meeting the public, do you think?

W: Oh, there certainly were times in there I know that he was delighted. HIs trip to Berlin [for instance]. I think he did.

I always thought he liked people tremendously. Yes, of course he did. He would come back from trips and talk about--what was it--squeezing the flesh. Yes, I think he did. I think he did.

G: Did he like to talk about average citizens that he had met or mail that he had gotten from somebody?

W: He would talk about mail that perhaps cheered him up or made him feel he had accomplished something, yes. I think to us a great deal of conversation, as far as people were concerned, were the people we all knew who were involved in the governmental process in one way or another. And as I've said earlier, I thought he was very understanding of people in the Senate. He never went off, for instance, when Bill Fulbright was criticizing Vietnam so much. He [LBJ] always seemed to me very tolerant about it. Not that he didn't know what was going on or anything, but he certainly did not sit around ever when I was there leaping upon somebody's back who disagreed with him or feeling that because they disagreed with him that they were any enemy or anything like that. I thought on the contrary he was tolerant. I used to get really more furious in situations about people than he seemed to show, and I mean times even when he was really going more into depth about situations. He might make a joke about it, say, "Oh, that pill," or more colorful Texas language. Bue he did not, when I was there, show bitterness toward some people who, I thought, well deserved his bitterness. He did not get into that type of destructive, negative kind of reaction when I was around.

G: Do you think the press mistreated him in their coverage of his presidency?

W: I don't know how I feel about that. I think it will take time. I think that he could have been a little different with the press. I mean, I think there are some ways I would say that I myself think he could have been a little different with them that might have been more to his advantage.

G: What was his attitude toward the press that might have hurt him in this respect?

W: You mean how his behavior hurt him? Well, this is only my opinion. I think that first of all he should have been perhaps more remote, less sensitive to the press, even more remote. Although it would be hard for me to say that since my husband was a journalist himself, and it would perhaps look as though I somehow didn't want the press close to him, wanted to save all that for Bill, which is just ridiculous. But he should have kept more of a personal distance from them, I think. Now, not in an isolated sense. In other words, have interviews with them, but not. . . . When you let your hair down you have to expect not quite the same treatment. I think he sometimes did that too often. He didn't understand that all of them were not going to really judge him too fairly.

G: Do you think he tried too hard to win them over?

W: Yes, absolutely. And [he] cared too much. If he hadn't cared so much he wouldn't have tried so hard. He really wanted to be understood, and I think that probably he will be in the end.

G: Do you think he was too particular as to, say, what constituted

a suitable or favorable news article?

W: Well, really what I think is he should have left the press to the press, not commented on it so often, particularly not shown sensitivity to it. [There were] so many situations that were more important, it seems to me, where he didn't show sensitivity, and yet he did to the press.

G: For example?

W: You mean what areas? Well, I just said that he did not sit around criticizing people who really disagreed with his policies and taking off on them, and personalities who, it seemed to me. . . . At least when he was with us he didn't. If he did, it was a very flip phrase; it was no strong hate campaign, or "I can't stand the guy," or anything like that. I think he got very frustrated, too--and of course, this is well known--very frustrated at ineptitude. He thought that the press at times asked stupid questions. Actually, his attitude toward the press was very much like so many other men in Washington. Dean Acheson certainly would have agreed with him, in his own life, about the press. And many other people would; it was not a unique attitude. He was always impatient--we know that--with ineptitude. He would certainly be impatient at this interview. He would say, "June, you should have prepared it for six months, have everything written down." I can hear him.

He really believed in the 'can do.' I think that probably even if a story didn't reflect well on him, if he thought it was competent he could have taken it. He didn't

like incompetence of any kind.

G: Was his self-concept as a politician, a political leader, different from your [concept] of him?

W: No, I doubt it. I don't know if I could say exactly. I do remember that the first time my husband wrote a profile of Lyndon Johnson it was in Harper's magazine. I believe it was when he was in the Senate. It was stressing his professionalism rather than his sense of humanity, which I think was very deep: his sense of humanity. He said to Bill on the phone. "Some day perhaps you'll understand that I am utterly . . ." I think he was disappointed that Bill hadn't grasped the fact that he was perhaps as liberal and perhaps as interested in the things that it was eventually apparent he was interested in: education, health, etcetera, etcetera.

G: Do you think he was more comfortable around people who were more liberal than he was than people who were more conservative than he was? In other words, if he had a choice, would he try to be the most liberal person in the room, or would he like to be the most conservative person in the room? Admittedly, these are extremes.

W: Well, I think there were occasions--that's obvious, that's politics--where he would play to one person's point of view, perhaps, or to another's. I don't know about when you say, "Was he comfortable?" I think he was very comfortable with my husband; that is the only thing I would say .

G: Do you think he felt more comfortable with attacks from the right than he did with attacks from the left?

W: Yes, I would guess that he did. I would assume that he did. I think that he wanted to be appreciated. To say by the left I don't think is quite true. I think he wanted to be appreciated for what he really was, and I think that he had a very frustrating time trying to make people understand what he actually was. He had it early, perhaps, in his career. Obviously, to do as well as he did he had many friends in the conservative Senate: Dick Russell, et cetera. But I think he did care very much what the liberals thought of him.

G: Just a minute.

(Pause in recording.)

G: We're on. Let's talk about his area here. You say you think that he was an existentialist.

W: I think he was an existentialist in the simplified view which I would say is my view of it, that he did not carry his disappointments onward from day to day. That he awakened every morning with great verve, drew his energy up, and went right on trying to create himself out of the country, out of the problem that existed that day. That he did not allow disappointments to pile up, and that in that sense perhaps did not even realize . . . in some areas, situations that he might not have realized--this is very cocky of me, because I'm just saying my impression--that he may not have realized that things had gotten to some points where they had gotten. At least this was my impression as I saw him, that he would wake up with boundless energy thinking that he and everyone working with him could solve. That he did not give up. He

thought he could--and I don't mean "he," I mean the government, that they could solve the problems. I think that this was a tremendous talent. In some areas [it] may have been slightly a handicap, that perhaps he couldn't realize that there were some things that were just not solvable, even.

G: Perhaps Vietnam--

W: Perhaps.

G: --was one of the more difficult issues.

W: Perhaps, but I think really--and I would like to know this some time--I think we saw more of him in the last year and perhaps the last six months in consecutive meetings than we had all during his career. We were there a great deal. I think that he thought, when he said he wasn't going to run again, that he really could honestly solve that for the country. I think that he never--of course, he must have had to the last day--gave up that he could do that.

G: When did you get the idea that he would not seek reelection in '68?

W: He told my husband that, I think it was in '66, very definitely, and I really believed it. I think it was '66, but I'm sure that's on your records somewhere. Bill has written about it. We would often ask him, "Is that still solid, do you still. . . .?" And he always, consistently said that it was. Now it may have been '67.

G: Did he indicate what his plans were after retirement then?

W: Oh, he always indicated his plans that he was coming back to Texas.

G: Did he say what he wanted to do or hoped to do after he came back?

W: Well, he always talked about his book, and I'm sure he had plans for the Library. And of course, he loved the country and the ranch.

G: Let's talk some more about the people around him, his aides. You mentioned earlier that he had a good deal of confidence in his White House [staff].

W: He always spoke of them with confidence, yes, and appreciation, tremendous appreciation. [He] seemed to believe in them and trust them and I always thought had a great attitude toward them. And toward his Cabinet. I never thought that he was isolated in the sense that people say that he didn't ask for advice. Sometimes this has been a criticism. I always felt he got a big input and appreciated very much getting it.

G: This is one area that I wanted to ask you about. First of all, do you think that his advisers would hesitate in giving him advice that ran counter to something--

W: I didn't feel that they did. Now, I might have had that feeling because certainly my husband--of course, he didn't work for him--he wouldn't proffer advice, but if he were asked. . . . And that was a flat rule with Bill. He didn't write lots of memos to the President, as I know many people and many friends did, endlessly. His attitude was that if he was asked anything, he would tell him honestly. If he wasn't asked, then he didn't consider it really his business. I don't know. I heard people talking to him--all of his advisors at one

time or another I must have heard--where I thought that they weren't afraid at all to offer advice. Well, that was my impression. I was around when Buzz [Horace Busby, Jr.] was there, or Jack Valenti; gosh, almost all of them. Name them.

G: What was his response here? Would he encourage a divergence of opinion?

W: Well you know, this wouldn't go on for hours. But I never got the impression of this imperial President bit, myself. That just was not the impression I had when I was around Lyndon Johnson. Now granted, it just happens that I am not fascinated by power in the sense that I could possibly be in competition for anything, even attention. I didn't have that impression of him.

G: Another corollary to this is the way he followed the media so closely, the three television sets.

W: Well now, that was in his office. I went over there a couple of times in his office. I have already said I think he got too involved with the media, both in his mind and . . . those walks were great, for instance, but I think that they probably did as much harm as good. That would be my attitude.

G: But at least as far as keeping up with the public he seems to have been as well informed of what was in the news as anyone in Washington. He doesn't seem to have been isolated--

W: I don't think he was isolated; that's what I'm saying. I don't think he was isolated in any way. I wouldn't suggest that he be isolated from the press. I just think the manner

should have been perhaps a little bit more formal with them, certainly not isolated.

G: His forms of relaxation included going out on the Sequoia, going to Camp David, and going to the ranch. I suppose it depended on how much time he had and what he had to do, and perhaps the weather as to which one he went out on, is that right?

W: I think that's true. I think he relaxed. I think he had people around with whom to relax, but as I have said earlier, I think he was in a sense always thinking ahead, too, and probably recharging his batteries, in a sense. He would bowl a lot, which was good for him, of course, the exercise. He was a good bowler.

G: Did he generally tend to recount the problems or events of his day on these occasions?

W: Yes, he would, or he would talk about the next day. That's my point: I think he would talk about the next day and what was going to happen, too.

G: Did he seem to feel beleaguered at all in his narrative?

W: I don't know if beleaguered is quite the word. And you have to make a distinction of time here, too, [as to] how he felt. When the Great Society program was really moving forward, you could just see it. It was like he had a skipping rope in his hand. Then later of course, toward the end when he was really under tremendous pressure and wanted to try to settle the Vietnam thing very, very much before he left office, then he did show some strain. Because his time was running out, and

I think that he was disappointed most likely, had to be.

G: Did he feel, then, that his domestic programs had been successful?

W: I think he did. I think that he thought that he had accomplished a good deal and was pleased at what he had accomplished. I think his activity in civil rights pleased him very, very much, and I would even say he was thrilled about it.

G: How about OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity], the Poverty Program?

W: Yes, of course he was. I don't recall now whether there was criticism then; of course, there was some later. You know, he meant it all so much that how could he not have been pleased?

G: Do you feel like he felt that they had made some mistakes in the earlier years of the Vietnam war that were making the later years more difficult or making it more difficult to resolve the problem?

W: Who do you mean by "they," the Kennedy Administration?

G: No, just the administration in general.

W: I never heard him say that. I never heard him say that. I don't know; I can't say how he felt. I know that he wanted an honorable settlement, as he had said so many times. He did not, in my opinion, want a dishonorable settlement, and he felt it very strongly.

G: He never indicated that he would have done things differently if he had had it to do over again or that President Kennedy

should have done things differently?

W: I think that he was upset very much at the Diem thing. In fact, I know he was.

G: He was much more supportive of [Ngo Dinh] Diem than Kennedy was, is that right?

W: I think he thought it was tragic that . . .(whispered) turn it off.

(End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I)

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