INTERVIEW II

INTERVIEWEE: LEE WHITE

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

February 18, 1971

Tape 1 of 1

F: This is a second interview with Mr. Lee C. White in his office in Washington, D.C. on February 18, 1971. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

Mr. White, last time we just got you started in the Johnson Administration, and you had agreed to remain as an assistant special counsel for the new president. We've talked about the problems of getting a Kennedy staff reoriented into a Johnson staff and meshed with a Johnson staff. Let's talk a bit about what you did with Johnson in 1964. You seem to have gotten very heavy on civil rights matters, particularly. I recall that later in that spring you were made an associate special counsel, and then you were Johnson's representative at the Washington funeral of L. A. Penn, you may recall, the assistant superintendent of the Washington public school system who was gunned down in Georgia.

W: I can't quite recall where we left off and how much of the melding together of the Johnson and Kennedy people had been discussed. But I had sort of a civil rights portfolio, among others, under President Kennedy, and President Johnson in effect kept that assignment as was true in the Kennedy presidency also. Just because I sort of had that assignment as one of my principal duties, it didn't mean that I was the only guy that was in the field. After all, the President himself as vice president had been head of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity in the so-called contracting

responsibilities. George Reedy, who had been his staff man handling that problem when he was vice president, was of course now a member of the White House staff. Initially he was sort of an extra hand and arm before he took over Salinger's press secretary duties. So I think it's important to make it clear that I was just one of the boys in that field, tromping around. It was an important field.

F: Was there any change in tempo or thrust between the two administrations, or did you dedication and zeal with regard to civil rights continue unabated? To a certain extent they're determined by events.

W: Right. And was also under President Kennedy. President Johnson had inherited the Kennedy legislative program that had been sent up in 1963, in large part responsive to the Birmingham explosion but also keyed to the earlier message that President Kennedy had sent in February 1963, which of course preceded Birmingham. I think that President Johnson was, of course like all human beings, a complicated character, had many different reasons and motives for wanting to pursue this. In part it was responsiveness to the times; in part it's just his nature to take a legislative challenge and know how to focus on the damned thing and keep at and keep at and keep at to the exclusion of everything else until it is accomplished.

In part, I think it was also a desire to kind of check over the people that he'd inherited and figure out how he could best work with them. I remember very early, for example, a meeting that he was going to have with some group--probably Plans for Progress, or something like that. I worked up a draft, and I know full well there wasn't any secret about it, that after he took a look at it he asked George Reedy to take a look at it and see what George thought--which, fine! I couldn't resent that, and I shouldn't have, and I didn't.

I think the President had a desire very quickly to establish himself. I remember one of the earliest meetings was with the so-called leadership of the Negro organizations--Roy Wilkins, Dr. King, Whitney Young, I think the head of CORE then was Jim Farmer--

F: Philip Randolph maybe?

W: I'm not sure whether Randolph came. But why it is so sharp in my mind is that I have an photograph at home taken--Okamoto had already started his snapping activities--in which the President is sitting on those two facing couches near the fireplace in the Oval Room. The walls are absolutely bare, so that meeting was held pretty damned early. He did want to establish his kind of relationship with them.

I think the first problem--and you can't imagine how inconsequential it is--but I believe the first problem he had was with concern over his daughter Lynda who went to the University of Texas and whether or not she should remain in a dormitory that was all white. President Johnson, I think perhaps more than President Kennedy, was sensitive--perhaps super or hyper-sensitive--to the little symbols. I don't say that critically. I think that's good, frankly. He, I believe, wanted to take her out and asked my advice, and I said I thought it was kind of nutty; that she ought to leave if she wanted to come back and live in the White House or anything else, but I didn't think that was a very valid reason myself. I don't know who was right, and I don't even remember how it came out. But I mention it only to indicate how almost teeny weeny inconsequential issues came up as well as the biggest major ones.

One of my earliest home telephone calls from the new President was

to set up a meeting of bringing down to the Ranch Dr. Weaver of the Housing Agency and Wilkins and the rest of that crowd. I suggested --I think it was put in a question form, maybe not--anyhow I indicated I didn't think it was such a good dammed idea. I don't mean to dwell on all the times that I "straightened out the President," or stood up and told him I thought he was wrong, because that's one of the art forms of being on the staff, is how do you handle that kind of a situation. I wouldn't mind in a moment getting to that particular aspect. I think it's an interesting and important one of any president's relationship to his staff. And it didn't happen. We did not pull the people down there. I think my view was that it would be so damned phony that whatever benefit he got from it would probably be more than offset. He'd be back in Washington soon enough, and why didn't they meet him in the White House! I think his view was kind of, "Well, you know, I live down here. This is my home, and I ought to be able to invite people to my home." Anyhow, it went back and forth a little bit, and they did not go down there. I can't say that I think it made one whit's difference to the manner in which the nation moved or didn't move, but, again, it's perhaps of some passing interest as to how the President's mind functioned on these things.

F: How do you, in effect, countermand the President when he has his mind set on something?

W: I don't think you do countermand the President in any matter where he has got all the votes. Congress can countermand him by passing a bill over his veto.

F: But when you think he is probably off on a mistaken course, whether

small or large?

W: That's pretty difficult. You know the classic gags that are passed around by staff where a guy says, "Who says I never could tell the President no. Just the other day I did."

"How did that come about?"

"He asked me if I had any complaints!' And I said, 'No, sir.'"

Or, "I stood up to the President the other day."

"Yeh?"

"That's right. The President said, 'Stand up,' and I stood up."

But there are some tactics, techniques, some successful some unsuccessful. A lot of it depends upon the personality of the President, the personality of the staff man, and obviously the circumstances. But I must say, despite all the reputation that President Johnson had, there were times when I was either asked my view and I had a pretty good idea of what the President wanted as an answer but just couldn't give him that answer and be fair to myself and be fair to him. It's tough, and of course you've got to recognize that when I'm telling the story if you don't discount it about 100-percent, it's a mistake, because these things are much easier to describe how you did this and how you did that 'way after the facts than it is to describe it accurately in terms of what precisely happened at the moment that it did occur.

I remember in my view a classic. How long are these things going to be frozen?

F: That's up to you.

W: Didn't we discuss that once?

F: Yes. You put the restrictions on it, and if you want to make it a

hundred years, that's your business. You're in charge here.

W: Yes, but I can't remember whether or not we've already gone through that and made the decision?

F: No. We thought we'd do it when we got through, and see what we had.

W: Right. In any event, to get back to what I think is just a beautiful illustration. You will remember that in the spring of 1964 three civil rights workers were missing in Mississippi--a fellow by the name of Chaney, who was a black from the area; a guy by the nameof Goodman from Manhattan; and a kid by the name of Schwerner from the Bronx. This was a first page story. This was a very big story and distressing all the way around. And of course, as you will remember, ultimately the boys were found--the bodies were found. They had been buried in the bottom of the dam site.

The congressman representing the district in which Schwerner lived was Ogden Brownie Reid, a Republican; the congressman representing the district in which the Goodman family lived was William Fitts Ryan, a kind of peppery, very liberal Democrat.

I got a call from Ryan, saying that he and Reid had talked about it, and the parents of the Goodman boy had gotten in touch with him and wanted to come in and see the President. He had talked to Brownie Reid who had said the Schwerners had gotten in touch with him and he thought it was a good idea, and he wanted to join in the request. So the request came to the President through me. Could the parents come in and see the President?

So I decided the easiest thing to do was to ask the President. I went down to talk to him about it. I caught him right between his office, the doorway led into what was then the O'Donnell office--the

O'Donnell office was much larger than the Marvin Watson office is now, so I think it's important to get a little feel for that room. That room then before it was altered was probably about forty feet long and thirty feet wide. I may be a little on the extreme side, but anyhow it was a hell of a good-sized room.

I was talking to him right at the doorway next to the O'Donnell desk. At that time O'Donnell was still there. Jack Valenti had a desk in the far corner of the room, cattercorner from the doorway where we were talking. That was a time when Valenti was kind of either learning the ropes or in there watching O'Donnell, or whatever the hell he was doing--

F: Kind of like the old Nebraska making of a young banker--just stand by somebody until you learn what to do.

W: Either that, or, as I say, there were some people who thought he stuck Valenti in there to be a stablilizing influence on O'Donnell. I haven't the remotest idea why he was put there. It was a big enough room that he could have easily been put there, and I don't know that there was any friction. But there Valenti was, on a swivel chair looking out the French windows, his feet up on the little telephone table talking on the telephone. The President and I were visiting, standing. I said that Bill Ryan had called and he was speaking for himself and for Reid, and asked for an appointment for the parents of the missing people with the President.

The President glowered down at me, and our difference in height made that very easy, and he said: "Now, listen. This is early in the summer. I don't know how many of these things are going to happen. If I see those people, I've got to see every other set of parents."

I muttered something like, "Yes, I guess that might be a bit of a precedent. I don't know. I really believe you ought to see them." And in putting the question, he said what did I think, and I said that he ought to perhaps see them, that it would have a salutary effect first of all on the parents themselves that he was interested, but more importantly I thought it would create across the country an image of the President being personally very concerned, even though we had indicated that concern in a host of other ways, with statements and dispatch of additional FBI personnel.

And then he said, "Well, I'm not going to see those people because I just can't have a whole parade coming through here."

Now I come to the point of the story. I used a device or a trick, not because I had in my mind to trick the old fellow, or to slither around him--

F: You were trying to outwit him.

W: I wasn't trying to outwit him. I was trying to make sure that all the factors would be before him. And I said, "Well, don't forget that one of the congressmen is Brownie Reid." Brownie Reid's family, of course, was very influential in the then existing Herald-Tribune, which is no longer in business. I said, "For all I know, I can see a headline in the Herald-Tribune tomorrow saying, 'President Refuses to See Parents of Missing Civil Rights Workers.' It isn't a case of whether we want to ask them to come in. They have asked for invitations. We either say yes or no."

Well, the President, you could sense, was tensing up a bit, for two reasons. One, because here I was, respectful and in a gentle way at least, struggling with his clear decision not to see

them. But most of all, I think he just got absolutely irate at that goddamned Herald-Tribune for running that story!

F: He was already reading it before it appeared!

W: He was reading it and thinking, "Those dirty bastards! Look what they're doing to me!" And because he was getting really mad as could be at the situation and everything else, and in part, me--don't forget, this was pretty early in the game--I think he looked down and he saw the little invisible tag that said, "Inherited from Kennedy." He didn't know what I was going to do if he got mad at me. But he had to find some way. And he wheeled around and he saw Valenti on the telephone, and just like thunderbolt he went across that goddamned room and said, "Valenti, every time I come out here, I see you on that goddamned telephone. Get off the telephone!" That was his way, and he knew Jack, who didn't even know the conversation and what it was about, probably was even oblivious to the fact of what was going on, was looking out the window, and that poor guy was the focal point of the President's ire. I think the President had just not enough confidence that if he got mad at me and called me a stupid bastard, he didn't know what I would do. The truth is, I don't know what I would do either, but he knew that Valenti would understand and be able to live with it.

He saw the parents, as I think he should have.

F: Were you present?

W: Yes. The meeting went quite well. He was extremely effective.

F: Were they distraught? Of course, they were undoubtedly concerned, because these are their children that were missing, but was it a sort of low key emotional sort of meeting. What do people in distress

do when they see a president?

W: Each of these people of course were different. The Goodmans, it seems to me, both--Mr. Goodman is now dead--among the most sensitive people I've ever met, just thoroughly--I was captivated by them both. Mr. Goodman was an engineer. They had another son. That may have helped a little bit. They were distraught naturally and tensed up because they were experiencing that problem of a missing son, and it was not very encouraging. I think during the meeting that the President revealed to them information that had come in just shortly before the meeting about the station wagon having been found.

Mrs. Schwerner was not present. Mr. Schwerner, a portly fellow, pretty self-assured. Again, I think he was kind of a very liberal minded man, had liberal views about political matters, was pleased with the fact that his son had engaged in this activity, and I was thoroughly impressed with him.

Mrs. Chaney, on the other hand, who also came up from Mississippi, a very heavy, relatively short, Negro woman, whose education obviously was limited, also was quite impressive. She brought her young son with her, a guy who subsequently has been subject of some stories about what has happened to him.

It was a good meeting, I think, and the President was just masterful with these people.

F: This was in the Oval Room?

W: Yes. He has that capacity to look at them, and he knows that he is using the Office of the Presidency, and I think it was comforting to them to know that the President of the United States and the whole

majesty of the government was involved and interested and concerned in trying to do what they could to find those boys.

F: Quite apart from the majesty, did he come across on a human being to human being relationship?

W: Oh sure. Oh, the President's great at that sort of thing. He really is. He can move very strong people to emotional feelings because he's articulate, eloquent, persuasive, and he has that capacity to really dig right down into them. He takes plenty of time. It's always a difficult problem to know how to use your time, but he wasn't rushing that at all. This wasn't a short one. He recognized not only the impact on the individuals there, but the symbolism outside of that office. It went I think pretty well, and I know from my discussions with the parents afterwards that they were swept up by the whole thing. They were terribly impressed and pleased.

F: Did you stay in touch with the families?

W: A little bit, especially the Goodman family. They had a memorial service after the bodies were found, and I went up and represented the President at that.

F: When the bodies were found, did they just learn about it through radio, TV, or did they get some official communication?

W: I don't recall, but I would expect that they were told as soon as it happened--that there was a little time, not much, but a little time. And if I recall the sequence of events, there were some early indicators where they would be found. I think, also, if I remember correctly, that the FBI was paying for some information. That information kind of strongly pointed in a direction that wasn't a very nice and comforting direction. As a fact of the matter, I'm

not sure. I think I was the one who probably called and told them about that.

F: This almost puts the President in his "eyes on the sparrow" cast. Now, we have great cosmic problems; we've got three boys who are missing. Does he follow this case as far as you can tell with a great deal of concern and interest?

W: Oh, yes. But you see this is not just three boys missing in the broader sense. This was--

F: This is law and order and a state in the union.

W: Right. This is the whole racial issue brought together in a specific situation where three human lives are the symbols of it. In addition to being the symbols, of course they are sons of parents. They're human, they're real, and they have all of the attributes of any human being. And the answer is yes.

When Mrs. Liuzo was killed in Alabama, I got a call at six o'clock in the morning from the FBI. That particular year I was probably number one on the FBI phone list. I hope that's the only list I made, although I don't think that's the only one I made. They had very bad news, and I called the President. He said I'd better call Mr. Liuzo, which I did. I was the one who had that difficult chore of passing the news on. I don't say it as though I shouldn't have had it. There are tough things you have to do, and tough things that somebody has to do, and if that's my assignment, then I do it.

F: How did Mr. Liuzo take the message?

W: Truthfully, my mind doesn't recall anything sharp about it, whether it was smooth or easy. I think, now that you ask me the question, he was more irate than thunderstruck, if you can understand what

I'm saying. He was mad at the whole situation down there, and then, as we found out, I think, she had not gone with his full blessings and approval.

F: That was intimated in the papers, and I just wondered whether that was--

W: I think that was right. My recollection is that he was more mad at circumstances and the people who had killed her than he was sort of instantly plunged into deep grief. Again, I think it's because of the conditioning. When somebody goes down where there's fireworks, you're not quite as surprised if they get a finger blown up than if they do if they're on their way to church.

Those were some pretty grim experiences.

F: You never knew when your phone rang what was going to be on the other end.

W: I had a call one damned night, I don't remember the town in Mississippi. Now it's such a hazy memory--God, it was bizarre! The FBI in Washington got a call from the FBI probably in Jackson, Mississippi, who got a call from a guy right out there at a place where a house was ringed by night riders. Inside the house were some civil rights workers and winos and hippies and guys who were scared to death they were going to be killed--and that wasn't a figure of speech. They were literally scared that their lives would be snuffed out that very night. I don't remember what the hell happened, then and I don't remember the circumstances except the fantastic experience of waking up at about two o'clock in the morning, or two-thirty in the morning, with a telephone call to say, they've got a situation down there and they just want me to know about it. "Well, what do

you want me to do?"

In part, I guess that goes with the staff role. It is their desire at the FBI, and understandably so, to have somebody hopefully with some common sense, but certainly in a position of responsibility, to whom they can hand the hot potato, or the radioactive grenade, so that if all goes wrong--and in part of it is for your information and to make sure the people are fully advised; in part, I think, it is also the kind of chain of command to make sure that the next level up has got hold of the thing so that if there is some unfortunate disaster and things go wrong, at least people will believe that they have touched the right bases.

F: Were you designated to receive this kind of news, or did you just evolve?

W: I don't remember any precise designation. I think it was more an evolution--

F: You came to be known--

W: Well, these things weren't programmed in the sense that said, "Now, we're embarked on a great campaign; there are going to be a whole bunch of these darned things." But Deke Deloach from the FBI, who was Mr. Hoover's liaison with the President with the White House staff, quickly learned that in that setup--and of course I got these during the Kennedy time too. There weren't as many simply because they weren't occurring. So there was clear understanding that I was the fellow.

You mentioned the funeral of Colonel Penn. He was the District of Columbia Reserve officer who was down at some fort in Georgia --Fort Benning. He was on his way back when a car drove by and somebody

with a rifle shot him. He was the passenger, not the driver of the car. That happened very early on a Saturday morning, if I recall. That particular weekend my wife and children--I'm not sure all of them, probably all of them--were at Camp David up in the Catoctin Mountains, probably up for a weekend. That sounds about right, that it would have been on a Saturday morning because I think he had a week's active duty and was en route back to--

F: Yes, he had finished a week's duty and was coming home.

W: The first word I heard of that, I was at the swimming pool. There was a telephone right by the pool. I don't remember whether the operator got me and gave me the FBI or whether Walter Jenkins called. But I used that subsequently--here's another instance where the President bent or turned, and I think it's to his credit. President Johnson had a hell of a lot of criticism for being stubborn and for the suggestion getting out that there wasn't anybody around who would ever tell him that his fly was unzipped or that he was about to do something that was a mistake. It's a minor point, but at least I think it's illustrative. He wanted to close Camp David on the grounds that it was during that economy move where he turned off the lights in the White House. I think the President milked that pretty hard, but it was a good point. I never faulted his little indicators and symbols of economy. I think that makes an impression on people like my mother in Omaha, and those out in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, who read the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

F: They can identify with it.

W: Yes, it's real and it's understandable, and nobody has any problem knowing what he's talking about. He wanted to close Camp David just as he wanted to get rid of the yachts. And I use this illustration to indicate that I wouldn't have any trouble going any place

with crowds clamoring but Rusk would. There ought to be a place for the President to use if he liked it, but even if he didn't he ought to keep the thing available simply because it was so ideally suited for this sort of thing. If people had to have a weekend also, it made sense to have them very accessible and it couldn't be better.

F: Close and remote.

W: That whole matter of Colonel Penn, which was an assignment that I would have worked on if I'd been sitting in the White House, I worked on at Camp David with the same telephones, the same system, and just maybe one peg over from my office in the White House jack to the Camp David jack at the swimming pool.

Of course, by my recounting these incidents, I don't mean to suggest that, again, I was the only guy involved. There was a whole legislative program going through, and there were problems within the executive departments and agencies about how much they were doing in the way of minority employment and discriminatory programs of their own, plus all the jockeying with the Congress over the legislation.

F: Now, in the specific civil rights legislation, you are of course not so much breaking new ground as you are implementing old ground that hadn't been plowed. Are you utilized to much extent to see that the legalities square in the drafts--in other words, are you to keep the President from running afoul of the future court decisions?

W: No, I don't know that anyone had that assignment; if they did, it wasn't me. It probably would be the Justice department, Norb Schlei, and of course the attorney general was Katzenbach. That was a

massive and very group effort, and while I was in the periphery I certainly was not at the core of it. I guess at that stage of the game the center of it was Katzenbach, together with Larry O'Brien, with a lot of others playing a role, including the President. President Johnson, as just about everybody who has been around him knows, immerses himself in the problems that he thinks are important, and that goes down to the very tiniest detail. He knows how to massage particular congressmen about as well as anyone. I had the impression that he worked extremely well with Larry O'Brien. He had a high regard for him and, of course, all of us who know Larry shared that view.

In terms of his relationship with the Attorney General, Bobby Kennedy, he threw him overboard on running for vice president. I had strict instructions from the President. He said: "You keep the Attorney General advised on everything. Don't make any moves in any of these fields where there's any doubt without checking with him." I think it was a desire on the President's part to do what was right, but also never to be criticized for not doing what was right. And these are two sides of the same coin. But the important thing was that he really meant it, and I took him at his word, and did. I had a good, easy relationship with Bobby.

F: Did you observe firsthand the personal relationship between the President and Bobby Kennedy?

W: Not in the sense that I did when they were kind of alone where some of the inhibitions might have melted. I did have one--I wasn't in the eye of the hurricane; I was where the big winds were blowing though--and the damndest day. Again, it goes to this business

of the relationship between the President and his staff. I don't know what particular project or problem I was in the President's office about, but he was talking to George Reedy. Talking is really not an accurate description.

F: It's a euphemism.

W: It's a euphemism. He was pounding the goddamned table, and he was jumping up and down and really yelling, and old George, with that shaggy head of his, was standing there like a solid old St. Bernard. The President was pounding the table, and I remember some of his words--I won't give them verbatim, but close enough. "Staff work, staff work, staff work. Goddamn it, George, the Kennedys always had perfect staff work and we can't do the simplest little damned thing." He was cursing and pounding and yelling and George was, if he was nodding, I'm sure it was an affirmative nod, not a negative nod. He was soaking this all up, just absorbing.

F: George never showed any visible agitation, did he?

W: Well, if he did, I never saw it. George is kind of a sponge, and he was just soaking it all up and I hadn't the remotest idea of what was going on, except that George was catching unshirted hell. Somehow or another that one-sided discussion terminated, and George shuffled off. He was up in the door that led into Juanita Roberts' office. The President began to simmer down a little bit, and whatever business we had transacted, and I went off. And that's the end of that story so far as the incident was concerned until I found out that night on the news what had happened.

That was the day that the announcement was coming out that the President had decided that no member of his Cabinet would be a

running-mate of his. This was the day that he cut off Bobby Kennedy's legs and all of the other guys who happened also to be members of the Cabinet.

Then the President was simply very tensed up. This was a tough day for him, and Goerge knew it, and I didn't know it. I didn't know that this was in the offing. George of course was totally and completely and personally aware, and probably even involved in the drafting of the statement and was going to have to read the thing to the press.

F: And field the questions afterwards.

W: Field them or dodge them, you know. But that's just a little indicator of how the President did function. I think he knew, he didn't think about it at the moment, but he intuitively understood that old George was going to live through that little blistering--it wasn't all that damned bad.

I think he always wondered about the inherited group, as to whether or not they would understand or could take it. You know, being a bunch of damned prima donnas they might just up and quit or do some other stupid thing.

F: Did he ever talk to you about you and other inherited people like you running straight to Georgetown?

W: No. About the only time that, first of all, I was ever invited to an embassy for lunch was when Secretary Jack Connor was leaving. There was a little lunch that the Belgian Ambassador gave. I don't know why I happened to be invited, but since I was invited so rarely to that sort of thing, as far as I knew, the day kind of fit, I could go, I went--and enjoyed it thoroughly. It was

just a delightful break in a busy day.

And that was the one damned day the President wanted me at noon. He called and I wasn't there, found out that I was off celebrating and parading around with a bunch of foreigners. In a pretty good-humored way, he remembered that for about a month--

F: And bring it up every now and then.

W: And every chance he'd bring it up, in good humor, I must say, I never believed that was improper or too heavy-handed. But he did, as I think has been reported, suggest to staff meetings--by the way, he had staff meetings occasionally where President Kennedy never did. I think one of the reasons Kennedy never did was that he never felt the need to. There was a more homogenized group. I think everybody was more alike. The works moved. Even though the hierarchy was a little fuzzy, it was clear enough that everybody knew how it worked.

The Johnson apparatus was different. Of course, in part, it was Walter Jenkins' style. Walter was so diffident. He simply would not undertake to pull the people together and tell them what to do even if the President had said, or--as he used to call him Mr. Johnson--if Mr. Johnson had told Walter, "You call those damned fools together and you tell them I don't want any of those guys going off to Georgetown," or, "going off to a bunch of those embassy parties and making fools of themselves. They've got full-time jobs and I want them available all the time." My guess is that, even if he said that, Walter would have softened it tremendously.

Marvin Watson was a different breed of cat. Marvin, bless his heart, is about as loyal and devoted and--

F: Unsubtle, I think might be the word.

W: It's a little unkind to Marvin because I do like him, but he really didn't have a hell of a lot of imagination. If the President said, "Marvin, damn it, I want you to go out on Pennsylvania Avenue and urinate at twelve o'clock every day, I don't think Marvin would say to him, "Mr. President, I can't do that." He would do it.

F: "Yes, Mr. President."

W: I think he would say, "Yes, Mr. President," and do it.

Which raises another question about staff relationships to the principal, especially a President. I don't know the way the lines ought to be drawn, and of course everybody figures that their own performance is just about ideal. They always can think of one or two instances where they slipped off the track. That's just to confirm that by and large they were virtually perfect. But when the President does tell you to do something and you think it's wrong--this goes back to what we were saying before. How do you handle that situation?

You may remember the experience that President Kennedy had. I don't know what triggered it, but he read something in the Herald-Tribune. And he said to somebody--I don't know who the somebody was--I'm not trying to protect him. I just plain don't know; it might have been Dave Powers. He said, "I never want to see that goddamned newspaper again as long as I live. Get it out of here!" Whereupon, somebody went down and cancelled eighteen subscriptions.

F: Which really blows it out of proportion.

W: Yes. So I can see the President, when the story gets out. Of course, the Herald-Tribune loved it. It was the best thing that ever happened

to them. And of course all of the rest of us, who kind of like to read the thing, had to smuggle it in. And no offense to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, which is a good newspaper, everybody who had been getting the Herald-Tribune started getting the Post-Dispatch whether they wanted it or not. It's just a perfect illustration, in my view, of where if the President says something, you either mutter or stumble out or say, "Yes, sir," or muffle it, or whatever the hell you do, and then you don't do it.

That's tough, to ever advocate not doing what the President tells you. And I think you begin to get into serious difficulty when you begin to protect the President, or your principal, whoever he is, from himself. Yet there has got to be some common sense approach to things, and if you know the man with whom you are working, then I think you're able to find out when he absolutely means it; know when he sure as hell doesn't mean it; and kind of understand the hazy area in between and then develop techniques for handling it so that you are really not saving him from himself without his really wanting you to if the point emerges.

There I think, to some extent, Marvin could not have well served the President.

F: Along that line, did you get a feeling that the staff work really suffered when Walter went out?

W: I don't think I can tell you yes to that, that it suffered. I really don't have a clear recollection of how it went. First of all, that was in October 1964, so it had been just about a year, and even though Walter was the easiest and the most direct funnel to the President, by that time just about everybody had worked out some relationship.

In part, it was because Walter did not need or demand in terms of his own inner security to have everything funneled through him. He did it. If Mr. Johnson said, "You check with him," he would check with somebody. Or if I wanted to get to the President, I would go through Walter.

F: So Walter was not personally status-conscious?

W: Oh, my goodness! Lest there be any doubt about it, it was the other way around. I had known Walter not too well when he was on the Hill, but as an assistant to the Vice President I got to know him and to admire him. He was just an inordinately decent, gentle, and fine man.

I remember when we went out to Andrews Air Force Base when President Kennedy's body was returned. Walter rode in the helicopter with a group of us. I think he was the only member of the Johnson staff who went, because first of all he had a small staff, and he may have had some of them down in Texas with him. So it started right there. Walter just never, never threw his weight around.

When he moved into the White House, he moved in to a room on the second floor that Dick Donahue had vacated, because Dick had left before the assassination. He didn't leave because of President Johnson coming; he simply left. Well, it was a nice enough room, more floor space than the room I had, and nobody could quarrel with that except that we all assumed that Walter was Mr. Johnson's number one man. Ralph Dungan came to Walter and said, "Walter, you take my office."

Walter said, "Oh, no, I don't want to disrupt things."

Ralph is a pretty straightforward and blunt forthright sort

of guy. He said: "You've out of your goddamned mind. You've got to come down here because, first of all, you'll be closer to the President, and he'll be able to walk in here and you'll be able to walk there. Besides, you ought to be there, and I'll go upstairs."

I don't even know whether Walter kind of acquiesced in that--I don't know where he approved of it. I know he acquiesced because the shift was made.

And it's worth taking half a minute to go back and tell you some history about that room. That was the room that Sherman Adams had occupied--a beautiful, beautiful room. French windows, large fireplace, and a beautiful painting over the fireplace. The sun would stream through there. When the Kennedy Administration moved in initially, that room was left open--unoccupied. Everybody was fearful that it would--because of the symbolism that it had been occupied by Sherman Adams--somehow or another take one member of the staff and stick them on top of the others. Then after thirty days, or forty-five days, quietly, unobtrusively Ralph moved from a little cubbyhole into that room, and kept it the way it was with secretaries outside, and just absolutely beautiful. I remember being in there and cutting off a few heads with Ralph in that gorgeous room.

Walter very reluctantly and diffidently moved in. The first damned thing you know he has got a couple of secretaries in there with him. Then the next thing you know he has got a whole bunch of files in there. He treats it like a warehouse. It's just his nature. He would not believe that he ought to have all that gorgeous space just wasted, unused, for Walter's sake. And believe it or not, because the President didn't want everybody in that room--you

know, any of us could walk in, including the secretaries--the President didn't want Walter's end of the conversation to be heard by everybody, and he made him move into the little room, adjoining that big room. There've been a lot of alterations since that time so it can't quite be reconstructed except in people's minds. But here Walter got shoved into the teeniest little old place!

The first couple of times that Walter had something that he wanted to talk to me about--you won't believe this--he walked up the steps and came down to my office and said to my secretary, "Is Mr. White in?"

"What do you want?" Respectfully.

I told him, "Walter you've got to be out of your mind! You just tell your secretary when you want me and I'll come down. You're busier than I am!" He was! The poor bastard had everything funneled through him at the outset.

Walter was so concerned lest--I don't know, the President, I assume, told all of his key guys--and I think I'll probably leave out somebody, but there was Walter, Moyers, Valenti, Reedy, and Busby--I think that's probably the package; there may be another one or two--he must have told them: "Fellows, we've got a bunch of prima donnas on our hands, and I don't want a one of you guys throwing your weight around." Because not a one of them ever did as far as I could tell. Now, maybe they did it where I wasn't able to view it, but I have a hunch, if they did, I would have heard about it, because there was a testing period.

I think we've retrogessed and gone back to that period rather than what happened under President Johnson.

F: I want to ask one question along that line, which is, I suppose, philosophical. Reedy, Busby, and so on have been around; they've been seen there; they're recognized as kind of old pros. Somebody like Valenti is a completely unknown quantity when he comes in--and quality. Does the office clothe itself in power, or does the man make it? Somebody like Valenti, in other words, is his own personal quality what raises him, or do people just ordinarily just say yes to the position he holds? In other words, is it like the uniform in the military which at one time--this is changing--but, you know, once upon a time if I was a colonel, I could say it, and there was no questioning.

W: I understand. And I think it's more of the latter than the former. I think that when somebody is identified as a member of the White House staff, most of the time his calls get returned pretty promptly. If he is identified, this being through the press or the grapevine --and normally it's in that order--as being very close to the President, then his responsiveness is greater. For the most part, this is true of the entire universe. When it comes to the government, it's doubly or triply or quadruply true. And, of course, when somebody from the White House calls somebody in the government--I'm not sure about Cabinet officers, but pretty close to Cabinet officers --at least, up in the secretariat, the assistant or under secretary level--unless it's an unusual set of circumstances they're going to assume that the guy is acting in the President's name. Now, sometimes it's easy to abuse that. And, as I say, the guy on the other side of the line doesn't know whether you've just walked out of the President's office or indeed whether you're still in there,

whether what you're calling about is the pet project of some other guy on the staff who's in a superior position than you, whether it's your own idea, or whether your grandmother from Helena, Montana, called with an idea that you're checking out. And they almost always resolve the doubt in favor of the higher standing of the demand, the inquiry, or the request.

It's fairly heady stuff. I remember coming home after a couple of days at the White House and telling my wife I hadn't relized how very smart I had become because people I had known for years were all of a sudden seeking my opinion about matters, most of which I had nothing to do with, but I was all of a sudden a very smart cookie. I told her that I wasn't absolutely sure, but I had a hunch that the reverse process worked exactly in reverse. I found out subsequently that I was right, that it works that way, going as well as coming.

F: Did you get involved at all in Walter's misfortune?

W: Not much. I was in Nebraska making a speech to a group of Rural Electric Co-Op managers. I believe it was October 14. The story hit late that night, and I saw it on television the next morning --and I was shaken. I called and found out that Moyers had called me all night, trying to get hold of me at the office and found I was out of town and forgot about it. Apparently he--I don't know whether it was he and the President or whether it was the President--he wanted somebody with whom they could talk about the legal thing. They had two of the best damned lawyers in the business, when you've got Abe Fortas and Clark Clifford, particularly Abe, on matters of that sort because of his own experiences in criminal law. But I think the

President wanted as many people as he could get together, and I never knew whether I should feel happy or unhappy that I wasn't available.

But immediately subsequently I got a very distasteful assignment. The President wanted me--and he didn't tell me this directly; he told me through Moyers--to take over the security clearance responsibility. And I didn't want it, and I said so. I did not have any interest or stomach for reading FBI reports, especially about people who were around me. Moyers so reported to the President. I don't know how carefully he couched it. I'm sure he didn't try to do me in, but he came back and said, "The President says you've got to do it."

"Well, listen, I'll give you the names of half a dozen people."

"No, the President wants you to do it." I think I doped out the reasons why the President wanted me to do it. Putting aside the immodest things first, I think he figured I was discreet and kind of low-keyed and not about to make a big to-do about it. But more importantly, I think, I had that nice little tag saying, "A Kennedy Man." I think he wanted that kind of insulation and protection that was being performed by somebody who was not one of his Texas cronies. I don't think I had any particular individual reputation for great wisdom or probity or anything of that sort, but really it was a separation from his crowd.

I reluctantly agreed to do it. I really didn't have a hell of a lot of choice. All I could do was struggle and see if I could work out some condition, the condition being that I would do it provided that when I got to the tough one I would have the right to talk to the President and/or bring Moyers into it, and that,

most importantly, as soon as they could get somebody in who wanted to do it and would be willing to do it and the President would let do it, I wanted to get rid of it.

It wasn't too long before Marvin Watson came along. And Marvin --hell, he was just beautifully suited to it. He loved it.

F: That was a job made for him.

W: Yes. And, of course, he's so damned narrow-visioned at times. I think he has broadened a little bit. But that was a fall-out that I personally got from that. And I was absolutely right about how disagreeable that job was before I took it, and that was all confirmed after I took it.

F: Did you have to spend much time with it?

W: Yes, I spent a hell of a lot of time with it because--

F: You must have resented the time.

W: Well, I did that because, first of all, it's a slimy experience to begin with.

F: Tedious.

W: Aside from the tedious part, which is not an inconsequential thing, it is not a very pleasant thing to read a whole bunch of unevaluated, unrefined, gossip about people that you work with.

F: I've seen a few of those, and I'm amazed in one sense at the completeness of reports on people who are basically clean people in the security sense. At what point do you get alarmed? In other words, there is a demonstration in Detroit--hypothetically. I take part in it. It shows up in the files that I was there. Do you care?

W: It depends a whole lot on all of the circumstances, what the job is, who the individual is, and how it fits, and what the description is.

I think, if I recall that period--and I've done as much as I could to block it out because I did not want to have any of the detail in my mind about individuals--some of it's terrible, you know--sexual deviations and running around with other women and credit problems and all sorts of suggestions about people promoting self-promotion. A lot of it, I have a hunch, accurate, but an even greater amount of it perhaps just nothing more than idle gossip and rumor. So, as I say, it was terribly uncomfortable to me--guys that I worked with! I had everybody's god-damned file except mine, and I didn't have the President's.

F: You were the only two who were sacred to you, huh?

W: Yes, I guess. Well, I don't know. But why anybody would want the President's--it's not a thing to do, I suppose. But I had everybody else's, and I really didn't like it.

Most of them you could very quickly scan through and push off to the "no problem" side. A lot of them were kind of hazy. I think there were probably a few guys in the military--that's another thing. Not only did we do it on the White House staff proper, but all the social aides that came and the bandsmen and the whole damned bit. When the pendulum swings, sometimes it swings pretty far.

I don't remember very many that got bounced out, but there were some, and some that I even agreed with. Some of the assignments, for example, is what do you do when you have a reception at the White House and a whole bunch of civil rights workers are invited!

By this time Marvin had come on board, and Marvin was deep into this. And Marvin was--you remind me of it by a guy who was demonstrating in Detroit--hell, he was kicking out this one and that

one, and pretty soon there wasn't going to be anyone at the party. All these guys! Marvin in a sense was a divisive influence within the staff probably because--it was not his fault, it was the President's fault for bringing Marvin in, President Johnson's fault, in my view, in sticking him where he did. And I know why he did it. But you've just got to remember that one day Marvin Watson was the assistant to the president of Lone Star Steel Company in Daingerfield, Texas. His whole experience had been in Baylor University and Chamber of Commerce work in small towns in Texas and Lone Star Steel Company. And that's all. He'd worked up in convention in Atlantic City ruthlessly, and I think that the President figured that things had been let go too far and it was his fault and he needed a strong man. I don't know where in the hell he found Marvin, but Marvin came in with that iron, unimaginative way of his and things did get organized.

F: Straightforward is a good adjective. He hews to the line.

W: And the next damned day, Marvin Watson was sitting outside that office next to the President of the United States of America--right outside! Marvin didn't have that kind of a capacity for instant growth; he really didn't.

On these civil rights receptions, for example, or meetings, Marvin would screen--he didn't want the President associating with a bunch of Communists or people that the FBI said somebody said had been a Communist sympathizer.

Now, Harry McPherson and I--and I was probably easier able to do this than anyone else--I served as more of I think, a bridge between some of the people on the White House staff who just couldn't stand Marvin's views. I don't think they tried to understand why he had his

views. He was a product of what his life had been.

F: Rural America in a sense, small town, anyhow.

W: We went down and talked to Marvin. We took him by the hand through about thirty years of national history about all these people. Marvin recognized there was some little risk involved, but, by God, he was going to do it. He understood. And he did. Hell, on that one, there wasn't any problem; everybody came; and nobody knocked over the China or insulted the President. It just went swimmingly.

But the important thing was--I used to kid Marvin. I was only kidding him on the square. Every single instinct that guy has got was wrong! He has to undo every damned thing, if he's going to work for Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s in Washington, D.C. in the White House, because Lyndon Johnson has gone through a great maturation period.

F: And Washington ain't Daingerfield!

W: And Washington ain't Daingerfield! So, good old Marvin! Another thing--I tried to get him to go meet with the press. We used to kid how I was his public relations man. Every time somebody would knee him in the groin, which was at least once a week--sometimes three or four times a week--I'd come down and say, "Well, Marvin, I planted that story. How did you like it?" He never knew whether I was kidding or not. Then I'd say, "Listen. Why don't you meet with these guys? You just can't do anything but improve! I know how goddamned stuffy you are, but if you talk with them, maybe, just maybe somebody will give you a break." I think he thought about it. But I just had the deep-seated feeling that when he first came in that office, the President said to him, "Marvin, these eastern city slickers are going

to cut you up. Now, don't you ever talk to them, because if you do, they'll murder you. They'll quote you out of context, they'll twist, they'll distort, and they'll do you in." And, boy, if the President said, "Don't talk to anybody," man, that was fiat.

He just didn't move one inch from there. And I think Marvin injured himself.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

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