INTERVIEW V

INTERVIEWEE: LEE C. WHITE

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

November 2, 1971

Tape 1 of 1

F: This is interview number five with Lee White in his office in Washington, D.C., on November 2, 1971. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

We have two things on our mind today, and they both have to do with the distaff side. We haven't talked about your role in getting the gifts in for the weddings and seeing that the proper ethics, legalities, or whatever it is, were observed. And then I have in my notes, "Talk to Lee White about Lynda and civil rights editor." Does that ring a bell with you?

W: Not much, but that normally doesn't slow me down. I'll find something to talk about.

F: Right. And before we finish, I want to ask you--I rather gather your partner, Mr. Semer, is someone I ought to see.

W: Yes, I would think so.

F: What's his role?

W: Milt came to the White House staff just before I left. I left in March of 1966, and I think he came in January of 1966. He had been the general counsel and the deputy administrator of the Housing Agency. When the Housing Agency became a department, President Johnson named Dr. Weaver to be the secretary, but believed, and I think properly, although this was not something that I discussed with him personally; this is more a reflection of my discussions with Joe Califano that I got this information, not personally from

the President--that if he were going with Weaver, and there was some problem about that by the way, it made sense for him to not make all the other appointments from the agency as though it was exactly the same thing simply with a new name. He wanted to make it different and as a consequence he brought in a number of people in the secretariat under Weaver. This made it awkward for Semer, who had been really the number two guy in the department, not only as general counsel but, as I say, formerly as deputy administrator.

So it seemed evident, although I'm not a hundred percent sure of this, that Semer had to go somewhere else, and somewhere else seemed to be the White House.

F: That's quite a refuge, isn't it? I never thought of the White House as a place to go when you don't know where to go.

W: Sometimes you've got to go through the alternatives, and that may be the only viable one.

But he came in January of 1966, and stayed, I think, a year. So that's a period of the Johnson Administration which may be of interest, and he was fairly close in.

F: Maybe you can shed some light and maybe you can't. In all my talking and looking around, Robert Weaver, I think, almost had a trauma over the length of time that Johnson took to name him as the head of HUD. Do you have any idea why Johnson took so long, other than the fact that he is sometimes slow and careful?

W: I know a little bit about that--not all the ins and the outs. I think that the President wanted to have a Negro in the cabinet. He wanted to appoint a Negro for what I regard as legitimate reasons. The President saw an awful lot of symbolism in that--I distinguish

in my own mind the difference between symbolism and tokenism--and obviously went out of his way to get a man for the Supreme Court, and for the same reason.

F: It's a way that you establish new job plateaus.

W: Yes, you break barriers, and once the barriers are broken--it's like Jackie Robinson. There was absolutely a deluge that followed Robinson. Well, there hasn't been quite the same flow following Weaver and Marshall. But at least any president can now appoint a black to the cabinet. I think no longer does anybody have to be worried about what are the political consequences of making that first big move because it has already been made.

President Kennedy kind of foreshadowed that by I think one of his rare emotional outbursts when his own proposal to create a Department of Housing through reorganization plans was being thwarted. He said that he was going to name Dr. Weaver to be the secretary. I think this was not one of his best or most shining moments, but he figured, "Screw 'em! I'll let them know that this can be a racial issue," because he really believed that an awful lot of the people were blocking his reorganization plan for that very reason. So he thought he would throw the gauntlet down to them. Well, I don't know how many of them were motivated by that, or it was a complex series of factors that motivated them, because there were some legitimate reasons why you shouldn't create a department by a reorganization plan.

In any event, to go back to the President Johnson story, I think he really did want to appoint Weaver, but he had some advice that Weaver had not been the best guy for the job, and I think he

was torn between the desire to do it and also his recognition that if he did not do it, especially after what President Kennedy had said, that it would have been a setback.

F: He almost had Weaver handpicked for him.

W: He almost had Weaver handpicked for him. And because Weaver was such a natural and logical candidate for it, not to have appointed him was not such a free choice. It isn't like going out and selecting because if, for example, the agency head had died and then you go out and you pick anybody you want and then that decision rests on the assessment of the positive choice. And hardly ever do you have people talking about who you didn't pick.

In that set of circumstances the President did not have that freedom not to pick Weaver without creating a very serious fuss. I don't know how difficult it would have been to handle. Yet I think this in large measure is what troubled the President. He really wanted to have the best man--I don't know anything about the relationships he had with Weaver personally, but I did get the impression that he had some doubts, not about Weaver as a man in terms of his personal conduct or his capacity. But assigning to it the loftiest of motives, the President just really wanted to get the best man, and he wasn't so damned sure that Weaver was. I'm not so damned sure he was either, but I thought he was highly qualified and I know that I recommended to the President that he appoint Weaver, partly because I was wearing a civil rights hat at the time, and I knew damned well that if he didn't there would be hell to pay. This isn't to say that the price would not have been worth it. I don't know. But I think this was part of the explanation for the long delay. I do not believe that it was a testing

period.

As you know, the President did the very same thing with Nick Katzenbach, which was even a longer period, and I think more painful ahd hard because the statute which created the Justice Department has some provision whereby the President is forbidden from leaving that post vacant for more than thirty days--a statute, and I don't think I ever knew the legislative background of it and why it came to pass. But there was an extra little gimmick. The President was in effect ignoring the law. But I don't think I can add any more to it. I don't know whether the President has focused on that in his book or in his own memoirs or recordings, but that's the best I can do for you.

F: Let's talk about your job as gift adviser.

W: I kind of fell into that during the Kennedy period as assistant special counsel. You get a bunch of cats and dogs and odds and ends and one of them was the use of the President's name--his family's name, the seal--for commercial purposes. There's a little struggle between good taste and the desire on the part of the President not to be super fussy and critical.

F: Does it increase or diminish your problem, the fact that you have two fairly common names like Kennedy and Johnson?

W: I don't think there's any significance whatsoever.

F: I mean, obviously if I use the name Eisenhower in something, we know this, but so many people are named Kennedy and Johnson.

W: More illustrative would be the rocker company that makes rockers and calls it the John F. Kennedy rocker, because rockers became kind of a little vogue then. It's penny ante stuff for the most part. People

raise questions about the dignity of the office and the dignity of the presidential seal. Some guys will do things like make paper dolls of Mrs. Kennedy and the little kids. It's just the tiniest ripple in the tide of time, but anyhow somebody has to worry with those silly-ass little problems, and I was the somebody. You kind of try to use good judgment. Most people are fairly responsible.

But you get one bastard who I think was absolutely unreasonable, and it was this cut-outs. I think his problem was he was a fly-by-night operator and whatever money he had was all tied up in these damned things, and he wasn't about to give them up. Trying to prosecute him was just almost hopeless. I would hate to find myself with that as something I had to do on a full-time basis.

It kind of, as I've suggested, had more to do with good taste than legal remedies. Most people were indeed responsive. And I sort of fell heir to the same thing when President Johnson came along. Some guy was selling boots, good old boots with the presidential seal on them. I think President Johnson probably had a pair of those either made for himself or given to him, and so somebody was trying to peddle the damned things. That's the sort of stuff we would try to stop.

F: He's a natural for a hat.

W: Oh yes. You know, a guy's in the selling business. He wants to sell and if he finds a gimmick, he's going to use it. Most of them just were offensive in part because of the crummy artwork. You've probably seen some of these plates that they sell for souvenirs in Washington that purport to have paintings of President Johnson and Mrs. Johnson or both or the Kennedys, and it's just kind of offensive. But then,

what the hell! If somebody wants to take his money to spend for a plate that has a crummy painting on it, do you really tell him he shouldn't!

This sort of naturally put me in this area of activity and when Mrs. Johnson was contemplating some of the problems associated with the first wedding, I think she and Liz Carpenter and Bess Abell decided that there was going to be a lot of problems involved with gifts and suggested that I should meet with Mrs. Johnson and Liz and Bess and Clark Clifford who was also there. We sort of noodled through the problems of how do you gracefully say "no" or say "yes", or what to do with it--what would be reasonable and what would be unreasonable. I haven't the remotest recollection of what guidelines we came up with. But in those areas, I'm sorry to say that the achievements are measured in negative terms. The wedding comes and goes and there's no criticism on this level and you feel good. It is like the poor Secret Service who have to measure their accomplishments each year by saying, "Well, thank God the President didn't get shot this year!" It's not very satisfying fare frankly, but that's part of the job.

I did appreciate the exposure to Mrs. Johnson because she's one of my all-time favorites. The woman is extraordinary, she really is. She has got a superb set of instincts, and I don't know of anyone who has a better set. Obviously in large measure this means I agree with her on a hell of a lot of things, but I don't know any other test to apply to anyone.

Here, she evidenced great sensitivity and great good judgment and the desire to do right for the right reasons. There just aren't

enough good adjectives for me to grope around to find to apply to her. She's first-rate.

Above all, I don't remember having mentioned this to you previously, there's no secret that she is the one person in the whole administration who knew exactly what to do and did it when Walter Jenkins had his great difficulty. I must say, that's a mark of a very decent, very fine, very warm, and very courageous human being. She wasn't thinking about what the hell impact this would have in Texas or New York or Greenwich Village or anywhere else. She was just--

F: She did what was right, and so the politics were right.

W: She did what was right because she had to do what was right and fortunately the politics of it were right. I'm not sure I'm willing to go quite so far as to say that everything you do that is right is good politics. But in that case it was the right thing to do and I don't think politically hurt a bit. When the President wins in such an overwhelming landslide with so many different factors it's hard to say. Of course he did have on that very narrow point an enormous break because of the Khrushchev thing that happened the next day that swept this off the front pages.

And I must say, I don't think the President really distinguished himself in that whole effort in trying to--this is now newspaper basis. I have no inside information. I was not personally involved. I was out. I think I might have been but I was out making a speech in Nebraska. The nature of the problem was such that Bill Moyers called me and I just couldn't get back in time to sit there and talk about it. I don't know how comfortable I would have been doing it, but you sometimes have to do things that are uncomfortable. But I think

the President made a bonehead mistake in trying to get Clark Clifford and Abe Fortas to kill the damned story. You can't hide a bull fiddle in a Volkswagen.

F: It would have been worse if leaked.

W: Yes. It's just too bad that you sometimes do things with your eye on the immediate short-range that with the benefit of a little broad reflection it would have been better. This of course is one of the fundamental difficulties of the staff job, especially for a high-powered principal like Johnson. I think we've already spent quite a bit of time on how the hell you tell the guy "no", or what do you do to make sure that he has a little extra time. I don't think that if I had been the one who had been called in by the President who said, "You get hold of Ben Bradlee," or whoever the hell it was at the Post, "and tell him that he can't do this," I don't know, might never know. I don't think I'd have had the guts to say, "Mr. President, okay," and then not done it. Or, figured out some device for telling him, "Okay, but I know enough about--."

Here to just pull this out of the air, and it's the most hypothetical thing in the world. I think I've already told you that one day I'm going to write an article about how the hell you protect the boss from himself, knowing full well whenever you get to that stage, it's time for him to get a new assistant because you're not really supposed to protect him from himself unless explicitly or implicitly he has told you that he wants you to.

But I think what I would have done in that set of circumstances, just absolutely blue-skying this, I'd have said: "Mr. President, I know those bastards at the Post"--although I don't think they're

bastards, but in order to set the mood--"they'll crucify you. They'll talk about how we tried to fix this thing, and God almighty, the last thing in the world you want to do is look like you're trying to control it. I can just see the story now, not in the Post, but in some other disagreeable paper. 'President Attempts to Muzzle Press.' And we've got two stories now, one about poor Walter, and the other one about poor President." I don't know if that would have carried with him--

F: Fortunately you didn't have to find out.

W: I never had to find out.

F: Did he ever sort of get annoyed at you or someone else who was on a legitimate enterprise in Nebraska, or wherever, if something broke back here that you would have been mixed up in just because, "What are you doing out in Nebraska when I needed you here?"

W: Yes, a couple of times, not much--partly for two reasons. One, I didn't do too much traveling; and, second, I wasn't that damned close in. He wasn't always wanting me. If he'd always wanted me, I think I would have probably done even less travelling. And it so happened that what I was doing was part of his plan. I was supposed to be doing it. It was working with the Rural Electric co-ops. They have a series of regional meetings. President Kennedy had set this up. We set this up in 1963 with the view to thinking it would be a hell of a lot better for the White House to be expressing interest in what the Rural Electric co-ops were doing in 1963 and 1964, rather than 1964 only. This was perfectly agreeable to the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, a big trade association.

F: And with Johnson it would be nearly a sacred cow.

W: And when President Johnson came along, he said, "yes". You know, you hear about the Pedernales Co-op story about eighty times, but it was a good story, and it was a fair story, and everybody loved it. So that's where I was. I was at a regional meeting in Lincoln, Nebraska, when Walter's story broke.

To answer your question, very rarely did I ever get on the embassy circuit, partly because I just wasn't that important a name. The embassy people go kind of more for the names that hit the social pages, and partly because my work assignment just didn't take me there.

But one day there was a luncheon being given for Secretary Connor, who was leaving the cabinet, by the Belgian Ambassador. Although I had not done a great deal of work with Connor, enough that I was on the list of people invited, and, hell, it's a pleasant little slice of life to go out to one of those things. Here it was, in the middle of the day. It was a gorgeous, beautiful, weather-day. I was feeling pretty good about little Lee White from Omaha, Nebraska, having a White House car take him out there to this big, fancy embassy on Foxhall Road. We were having a drink before lunch, a sparkling group, everything just great as hell, and the President called my office. I wasn't there and of course he wanted to know where the hell I was. Obviously, he was told. And in his rather good-humored, taunting way for a week or so I heard about everytime the President wanted me I was at an embassy.

F: So you remembered that party.

W: Yes. I guess if I had to do it again, I probably would. But I don't really think I've ever felt the President in a serious, or nearly seriously

tone saying, "Why the hell don't you stick around here? I'm paying you not to go out and socialize but to be right here when I need you."

As President he certainly had an enormous belief that he was the sun and everything else revolved about him. I'm sure somewhere along the line, probably from me, but from others you may have gotten the Perry Barber story. Have you got the Perry Barber story?

F: No.

W: Hell, you ought to get that story. It's a heart-breaker. It doesn't show the President looking very good, but--

F: Who is Perry Barber? That's the first time I've heard of him.

W: Perry Barber is a bright young University of Texas Law School graduate. He went to work for Judge Brown down in the Fifth Circuit. Do you know Judge Brown, Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals--John Brown?

F: No.

W: A very able guy. He got into a little trouble with some of these oil and gas holdings, reviewing FPC cases. But I have a special fondness for him since he happens to be a graduate of the University of Nebraska.

F: Where is he, out in New Orleans?

W: No. He operates in Texas, my guess is probably Dallas.

F: I've missed him and Barber. Go ahead.

W: Anyhow, Perry Barber graduated from U.T. Law School and was his clerk. Jack Valenti somehow or other found him, or he found Jack. He came to the White House as Jack's assistant. By the way, I think this is under the Johnson group. The White House staff began to develop a little bit more of that--somebody was somebody's assistant. I'm not

sure this is a wise development, but anyhow, Jack had as one of his assistants, Perry Barber. Perry Barber was bright as a damned whip --a nice, soft way of talking, which of course was terribly disarming to us nasal types from the Midwest. But he was a bright, crisp, clear kid, and he worked with Valenti on the President's schedule. And you know, all the goddamned minutiae that is required there to keep things kind of flowing. I'm told by the newspapers that President Nixon has really got a staff that handles that stuff superbly. They also squeeze out some of the emotions and some of the substance but from an organizational point of view they seem to be about like clockwork.

Perry did this, and did it superbly. But after a year and a half or so, Perry kind of thought, and I must say most of us who knew him thought that it was really kind of a crummy, disagreeable, menial, and wasteful experience for him. It was nice to have done it for a year or a year and a half, but who in the hell wants to go through law school, be a top student, be a clerk to a judge, and have a great potential as a lawyer, and spend your goddamned time on somebody's calendar!

I was not a party to it but because I was a good friend of Perry I knew the story. Either he went to Valenti or he went to Califano or one or the other or both, and sort of said: "Fellows," in a most pleasant and gracious way, "I've served my time here and my apprenticeship, and it has just been wonderful. I've never enjoyed anything more. The ability just to talk to a president and to see one and to be part of it is fine, but I think I'd better get on about my business." Everybody agreed. That made sense.

And I think it was through Califano's prior association with the Defense Department that Barber was slated to become a special assistant to the General Counsel of DOD. I don't remember who the General Counsel was then, it was after Cy Vance had left, long after that.

F: It would be a good job.

W: Oh yes, a first-rate job. And of course, again, Perry had excellent credentials. He was good at the details that Valenti had to handle, and he worked nicely with Valenti, and Valenti admired him. Valenti wasn't trying to get rid of him. It was the other way around. He was responding to what he saw as the guy's need for growth and development.

I don't know any of the detail, but in a gross way the President heard about it and he absolutely went ape! Saying, "Goddamn it," he was entitled to decide who would be doing what, not these punks. When somebody tried--again, this is all hearsay; I think you have to discount it heavily--I don't know if anybody tried to explain to the President about the need for this young man's growth and development, that what he was doing was obviously of importance but there had to be a hundred guys who could do that job. But the President didn't see it that way. He saw it that his needs, his requirements, were what governed.

As a consequence, Perry Barber did not go become special assistant to the General Counsel at DOD. I don't know, again, the details of it; but in a matter of very short order Perry Barber resigned from the federal government and he went to Houston and joined a big law firm --the Baker, Botts firm--and it was a terrible thing.

F: Lost a good public servant.

W: I don't think we would ever have kept him permanently, but you don't have to keep people permanently. We did lose a good man. And the President did it. I know a little bit about why he wanted that. He figures that it is more important that his schedule be absolutely flawless, smooth, and everything else, than that some guy have a chance for career development. I don't happen to agree, and I assume if you ever got the President to back off he would perhaps on reflection agree. But that was an ugly incident, in my view, and it was just too bad it happened because this kid didn't deserve that. I was really kind of pleased that he had the guts to tell them to just shove it and leave.

F: Did the President ever give either individually or collectively his staff pep talks on such things as behavior, or where they should be, or where they shouldn't be seen, that sort of thing, who they ought to be out with at night?

W: Yes in a general sense. It was sort of the effort to formalize, regularize--

F: In a way he's enough of a paternalist that I can see. He looks after his own. I can see him giving fatherly talks, but maybe he doesn't.

W: It wasn't quite that, but close. There were efforts to have little staff meetings. They never became regularized, as I understand they are at the current White House, just, again, from newspaper stories. But, yes, there were occasions when he'd call together the group. For the most part it was on substantive matters or a piece of legislation or something.

F: Is this like some office staff, a little rumor-mongering and

scandal-mongering group, or do you stay too busy for that? Say, hypothetically, Lee White was seen in Georgetown with some floozy on his fourth cocktail?

W: Yes, I think there was a little of it. There was more of it in the Johnson group than in the Kennedy group in one way. In the Kennedy group I think there was a little more glamorizing and lionizing of some of the staff because of the contrast with the Eisenhower group, which was a very pale crowd. And the Kennedy style was one of a little more swinging, a little more glamor. So to that extent, I think the boys--or some of them--were far more pleased to find their names in the social columns. And this meant a little more wrinkling around the edges for those who didn't quite make it or for those who made it in a different way. But I think there was almost no knifing in the Kennedy group. In the Johnson group there was very little, but I think there was more. This may have been only my own myopia. You only see what you can see, and I was kind of removed in both instances. I never wound up in that little tight circle around either President Kennedy or President Johnson, so that to that extent my own vantage point was not really not too--to think of a new term "vantage point"--

F: Making a cliché out of it now. Back to the gifts. Do people send outrageously expensive gifts to a prospective bride like this, with ostensible idea that this may curry some favor? Do you have that problem?

W: It beats the hell out of me, I really don't know. I never saw the gifts. I'm sure that there's a warehouse full some place. Many of them that were of the personal type--somebody would have spent a long

crocheting something into a design--who knows what moves people! I presume an effort to either demonstrate an affection for the family or for the girl who was getting married, or sometimes it's a challenge to create something attractive. And having created it and believing that the best way to get some attention is by giving it to a girl. I assume there are all sorts of different motives that prompt people to send gifts to those that they know or don't know.

I think that there may have been some who, particularly the foreign governments, who just believed that this is an accepted practice in their universe and they do it. And if the country decides that they ought to do it, then they must make sure that it isn't something cheesy that they're giving. I have a hunch that it escalates pretty fast, and the first thing you know they're really embarrassing the hell out of everybody by spending that kind of money since nobody really believed that this couple was so impecunious that they had to be started out in their house with a shower of kitchen utensils, for example.

I think this is one of the things that I recall Mrs. Johnson being troubled with, that it would get out of hand and then how do you in a gracious way try to keep the damned thing down. It just never occurred to me that she was in any sense trying to solicit, but trying to if anything turn it off or keep it within bounds, in part because that's the way it ought to be and in part because of the awkwardness that would be created. If, for example--and I use it only, well, it's not even a good example--if the tobacco institute sent something--that's special because of Bess Abell's

father, Earle Clements. But take any other trade group. If they send--

F: The Morticians Association.

W: Okay, the Morticians Association. If they send an expensive gift, and I'd say an expensive gift is anything over a hundred bucks or hell a hundred and twenty-five, distinguished from eighty-five it's fuzzy. But what if they send a five hundred dollar silver tray, or something that is beautifully put together, a bowl! You've got to wonder why they are sending that kind of money for that kind of a gift to a couple. Now if they know them, it's pretty good, but how can a morticians association know anyone. Maybe the president of it knows and if he wants to send them an individual gift of a War Bond, or whatever the hell you call them now--a Savings Bond, that's one thing.

F: Did people send money, or the equivalent?

W: I haven't the remotest idea. I was only in on the takeoff, not the landing. I don't know what the hell came in. My role was very minor. It was kind of on the basis of my great experience with this peculiar field, and out of that great reservior of wisdom and judgment that comes from screwing around with that. If someone wanted to know, what do you do! So we set up some guidelines that were just off the top of one's guy head, and they were tinkered around with a little bit, and those were the guidelines. I think that it worked out reasonably well because I believe, I'm not too sure--

F: The administration of the guidelines was not your problem?

W: No. Then I left.

F: Going back slightly, all these gifts that come in unsolicited to the

President, which can consist of anything from the largest watermelon grown in Hope, Arkansas, to grandma crocheting for six weeks--who acts as a clearing house in this case?

W: I don't know. I think that President Johnson had Dorothy Territo as sort of the custodian of these things, and I presume that she would--

F: I haven't talked to Dorothy about this. Perhaps I should.

W: I think she kept all this junk. If she ever got anything that she thought was dubious she'd probably go to Walter Jenkins and say, "What about this?" Or if Walter had gone, to Marvin or somebody equivalent. I would assume that guy would say, "Well, do this or do that. Send it back with a nice little form note saying, 'We can't accept it,' or keep it. Or, if it's something perishable give it away." I presume that under certain circumstances it might even go to the President.

F: Did you have an official taster or imbiber or something like that?

W: If he did, I don't know about it. The only thing I know is that I used to occasionally stick my hand into a big box of cigars President Kennedy got from the President of the Philippines. Evelyn Lincoln used to shovel them out to me. She knew I was a cigar smoker.

F: One of the bonuses of the office, huh?

W: One of the bonuses, one of the privileges, yes.

F: Too bad we split with Castro.

W: That was kind of painful. I hated to give up those good cigars.

F: Can we decipher my note on Lynda Bird and civil rights?

W: Yes. I think what I might have talked to you about is one time--

F: You just said ask you about it later.

W: Shortly after the President became president, I had a note from Lynda who said that she'd sure like to talk to me about civil rights, that her daddy had said that I was the fellow that could give her all the information. So I put aside some time, it was flattering. I read the papers, too, and I know about Lynda Johnson being the President's daughter.

F: It's nice to work with young people.

W: Yes. She came in, and I would have characterized her as a very bright, inquisitive, and interested young lady. She asked a pretty good set of questions, and I did my best to respond to them and give her a little feel for what I saw of it, although, once again, when you're in that spot your vision is very narrow at times, or very broad but not deep. It can be either way. Whatever you see is what you think is important, although it may have only a relatively minor importance. But with all those qualifiers I gave her as much as I could.

I may have, however, referred to the President's action immediately upon coming president. I don't know if I told you that story.

F: No.

W: Lynda was living at the University of Texas dormitory, and that dormitory was segregated. The President wanted to take her out, not because he didn't want her to go to the University of Texas. In fact I think he was talking about having her live with his sister. Does she live in Austin?

F: Yes.

W: I think that was what he had in mind.

F: Rebecca Bobbitt.

W: Yes. I'm a little hazy on the detail about how he wanted to handle it, but he was hypersensitive--you have to remember that period of time--about his own family relationships and his own attitude. I know it sounds corny and not too important, but he had in my view a very good feel for what he ought to be doing himself to indicate as the political leader of this country and the governmental leader of this country what was in good taste and what was not. He did not want to be accused--partly because he didn't want to be criticized for anything. I don't blame him, he was somewhat hypersensitive to personal criticism, as I think we all agreed was one of his problems, that he should not necessarily have been so.

I think it was rather one of those accidents. It was Larry O'Brien and I that were talking to him when this hit his mind. It was very early--I would say probably still in November, maybe early December. It seemed to me she came back after the assassination and stayed in the house for awhile before she went back to Texas. She was just about to go back, and the question was where to live.

F: The assassination would have come right on the eve of Thanksgiving. She would have had a normal four days or so holiday anyhow.

W: Did she stay here after school started, or did she go back to finish up that semester?

F: I don't recall.

W: In any event it seemed to me that there was some little breaking point where the President could have had her move out of the dormitory and not live there. I remember Larry and I saying that it just didn't seem the right thing to do, it was almost overreacting.

F: The dormitory was good enough when he was vice president, why not when

he was president.

W: Yes. And that he would have to do more explaining of why she moved out than why she stayed there. The truth of the matter is what they ought to do was see that the dormitories were desegregated rather than get her out of there.

There were a couple of other things where the President kind of wanted to go further. I don't know whether it's because of my own innate caution or conservatism or it's also possible to make mistakes, but I was somewhat of a restraining influence.

F: For instance?

W: The President wanted to have a group of leaders like Roy Wilkins, King, Whitney Young, Philip Randolph, and a few others come down to Texas and go out to the Ranch and have dinner with him. I said, That's a hell of a long way to go for dinner. It just strikes me as kind of--"

F: A little obvious.

W: Yes, kind of artificial, maybe obvious, and would be regarded as just a grandstand play. I said, "I've got a different suggestion though, and that is you're going to be having a bunch of government officials down, why don't you have Dr. Weaver, the head of the Housing Agency, come down and talk business with you and eat dinner? If you want to have that big first--"I didn't put it that way obviously. The relationships with the President, or any other boss, you don't quite get as flippant as you might when you are recounting it eight years later. But that was demonstrative of what I had in mind. And also the Lynda-dormitory situation.

F: Given the time and the place, Austin was moving toward integration,

which I realize is no longer a valid word, about as rapidly as it could and in reasonably dignified form. It did accelerate and wind up the last vestiges of segregation rather quickly after that, and I've often wondered--and I've wondered if you were privy to things --how much the President's hand was felt in this and how much it was just the moral effect, "Look, we've got a man up there in the White House; we can't embarrass him."

W: I don't have any reaction to that at all. I don't know of anything. I was not aware of anything where it was presidential action of the sense that the President got on the telephone and called a few fellows and said, "What the hell, this is the 1960's, not the 1860's, or 1940's or 1950's even. So let's get rolling."

I think frankly it was a more powerful force than that, and that is, that once the thing was cracked, it just had to move to the point where it was done. It is almost impossible to remember that it was as recently as 1963 when President Kennedy sent a--this is before the Birmingham thing--in early 1963, February, President Kennedy sent a message to the Congress on civil rights. There wasn't a hell of a lot in it. But the one thing that really was the purpose of sending the message was the advice of Louis Martin. Do you know Louis Martin?

F: Yes.

W: You must talk to Louis. Louis is truly a great social scientist. Louis said, "There's one damned problem. You can't understand it, but it's called public accommodations." There's a story in the President's books, excerpts about the difficulties that his help had in driving from here to Texas and back. Louis said, "We never had a President who said that it was wrong. If President Kennedy would

simply say that it is immoral to treat people like that, it would make a great difference." And he did. He said it in the message, and public accommodations--all of a sudden we were able to work out some damned legislation to get it enacted. Lo and behold, now it's almost universal in this country that people who are black or brown are able to go into a restaurant, to go into a service station and get gasoline and go to the toilet.

But I think once that gap was opened, forces just had to move in that direction. I think both Kennedy and Johnson fifty years from now will be remembered for--of course Vietnam will be very big on the five pages devoted to them, but also will be the fact that during that period at long last we came to grips--we had a hell of a tough time; we didn't do all the things we should have; we just finally reached the point in our national development were something had to be done, and it was through the leadership--and there are a lot of prices being paid for it.

I think there was, as President Johnson apparently says in his book, quite a bit of overpromising. One of the curses of our society is the group called speech writers. You know how those bastards do things to you. Fortunately I can say that because I'm not a very good speech writer and I never got pressed into that. Those goddamned speech writers will do in anybody if they're not careful. They can be as beautiful in their prose as possible, but if they believe there ought to be six point program and there are only four points, the bastards will make up two. And some poor slob will spend the rest of his life trying to justify this thing that the President had committed himself to because he wanted a nice, well rounded six point program,

even though those last two may have been absolutely late starters, half-baked, off the top of some guy's brain.

F: Something he thought up after midnight. A couple of short questions.

W: Good, because I want to throw you out.

F: I know it. One, were you as a lawyer privy to the President's ruminations about naming Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court?

W: No.

F: Okay, that's quick. Two, do you have any idea that the President understood the force he turned loose in the way of black militancy because of the distance that he brought the human rights movement? I feel sure, trying to put myself in his place, that he must have felt in a sense, "Look what I gave them, and they're not happy with it." On the other hand. as a man who did have broad judgment, he should have known that when you pull the curtain a little bit and let people see things that they haven't seen before that they want more, that you don't ever satisfy.

W: I think I can answer the question, and it's so ethereal that the answer has got to almost match it. I think the answer is that guy almost always knew what he was doing, and he almost always understood things. He's not a perfect man, and I think I've probably got a hell of a lot of things in there that if he read the transcript he'd get all excited about, even though I believe they are accurate. But in being as responsive as I know how, I think he was aware of that. I think he understood the legitimacy of those forces. And he was, like anyone else, terribly complex. If you would get him in his little group, especially the group of old political cronies, and he's capable of telling a joke that would be absolutely offensive to a

black man.

F: He could tell some that would be offensive to white men, too.

W: Oh hell, yes. That's for sure. But it was not out of any malice or wickedness or evil. He's what he is, and he's a hell of a great storyteller. I'm sure you've gotten that from hundreds of people. That guy's one of the greatest mimics and storytellers of all time. I remember sitting around there on Saturday afternoons wishing the hell he'd finish his story so we could go. That was his time for relaxing, and he figured everybody else ought to enjoy it, and it was enjoyable. But if you had to be somewhere else you had to figure out how the hell could you tactfully disengage to go, in the meantime recognizing that this was a pretty damned rare treat. You'd want to hear him if he were Congressman Johnson, but now that you've got the President there's always an aura of the office about whoever occupies it. He's a great storyteller.

Yet on the basic question I think he did know what was happening, I think he did understand the forces that had been let loose. I think he sensed deep down that this was something that he could do as a southerner, something that he wanted to do, and something that he knew he would be applauded and recognized for when history was writing its page about him. He frequently spoke about how he wanted to be known as the Education President. I think he will indeed get there, but that's going to be subordinate to this other thing.

F: Less dramatic.

W: Less dramatic. It may be more important. But this other has got a kind of national problem-solving flavor about it that is more than a problem, it's sort of like eliminating a great cancerous growth

that had afflicted us. And, God, it has been terribly difficult. And he was not insensitive to the problems and the difficulties. I think he was very good in his understanding of the people.

F: Okay, Lee, I promised you to sign off.

W: Okay, Joe.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview V]

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