INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM S. WHITE (Tape #1)

INTERVIEWER: DOROTHY PIERCE McSWEENY

March 5, 1969

M: This interview is with Mr. William Smith White, national political columnist. Today is Wednesday, March 5, 1969, and it's about 11:15 in the morning. We are at his home at 5264 Longhboro Rd., N.W., Washington, D.C. This is Dorothy Pierce McSweeny.

Mr. White, I want to begin our interview with a brief backgrounder on your very long journalistic career which began in 1927 with Associated Press. It was through AP that you first came to Washington from your home state in Texas, and you worked with them until 1945. From 1945 to 1958 you were with the New York Times and rose to the position of chief congressional correspondent. In 1958 you left to become nationally syndicated. Your column currently runs in, I know, probably over 150, and I'm not sure--I probably have that--

W: About 200, I think.

M: About 200 daily newspapers throughout the United States. You are also Pulitzer Prize winning author. You have four books to your credit now. Of course, one of them is the Johnson biography, The Professional: Lyndon B. Johnson, published in the spring of 1964, and I do have some questions a little later on on the development of that book.

Mr. White, as I explained, before we start on the interview, I think your columns and your biography and all your writings in general have very thoroughly and definitively assessed Mr. Johnson's career and the situations and events that have occurred over the years so that I do want to proceed more along the line of your personal relations with him.

W: All right.

M: I think the very first place to begin with is, I'd like to have you tell me how you first met Mr. Johnson--when, where, and how.

W: I met him in the fall of 1933 in Washington. I was then a young regional correspondent for the Associated Press covering--responsible mainly for Texas affairs. He was then secretary to Congressman Richard Kleberg from Texas. He was a highly active secretary. I met him in just the routine course of calling on various news sources, primarily of course from Texas, as Kleberg was. I discovered him right away to be an extremely knowledgeable, enormously energetic young man. We both, of course, were very young then. We set off immediately somehow on a friendship--I suppose sort of a chemical interreaction. I recognized him early, I can honestly say, as a man of enormous potential. That's about the way in which we met.

M: Do you recall any sort of very strong first impressions you had about him? You've mentioned a few here.

W: I think the first impression I had of him was of furious, almost incredible, energy. I also had an impression--now, this, as you know, [or] will have read about, was in the early New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt. Lyndon Johnson was deeply interested in that--in all that complex of affairs--and very sympathetic toward it, particularly in its aspects of attempting to deal with poverty and unemployment, farm mortgages, farm foreclosures--all those things very clearly engaged him personally as well as in his role as a sort of administrative assistant to the Congressman.

I suppose my second impression was that he was deeply concerned about ordinary people.

M: Throughout his House career, did your coverage of Texas politics and Texas people parallel this association?

W: Actually, not terribly so because it wasn't long after I came here with the Associated Press until I was transferred to the national staff on what we then called the "feature" staff. After that I saw him in these early years--in his early years and mine--not so much as a journalist as as a friend. In other words, I was no longer dealing with Texas affairs as such, and I then saw him in his role as a part of the sort of national apparatus politically.

M: During this early period in the House, was he able to ever help you out on any tips or stories or inside sources?

W: Yes, indeed he was. When I came here as a very young fellow, I went to call on old Mr. Garner who was then Vice President. Mr. Garner was not very hospitable to me because I was young and unknown and he had been used to dealing with the old established Texas correspondents here, including a man named Bascom Timmons who had a news bureau representing various papers. When I went to call on Mr. Garner he said to me, "Son, you just go hereafter and talk to people like Bascom Timmons." I was furious about that, of course. I said to Mr. Garner, "I'll be damned if I'll do that." Then I left his office. Parenthetically, we later became very warm friends. But I didn't like this of course.

By chance I saw Lyndon Johnson that afternoon, and I told him about my experience with Jack Garner, and he was quite sympathetic. As it happened, he had some designs of his own right then because Garner was either in fact, or allegedly, at that point trying to take certain local patronage away from the Texas Congressmen. Johnson, of course, had a great interest in protecting his boss Kleberg. So, yes, we did. He then told me this story--President Johnson told me this story, and of course I wrote it after I had confirmed it, and it made a big stir in Texas. That's how we set off in our journalistic relationship.

M: And this story was about the political patronage?

W: Yes. You see, I didn't know anything about it until Lyndon Johnson had told me. This, of course, was a somewhat unusual thing--for the Vice President of the United States to concern himself with this. This really amounted to local postmasterships, perhaps with internal revenue collectors, that sort of thing. In fact, Lyndon Johnson's disclosure of that to me, and my publication of it, defeated Mr. Garner's plan, so I suppose we had a mutual interest there--mine as a journalist and his in order to protect his boss, Congressman Kleberg.

M: Do you recall any incidents such as this? I'm going to be throwing this question at you at various periods.

W: No, not really. Actually, contrary to lots of contemporary thinking, the President's relationship to me and mine to him rarely involved any so-called scoops at any point, whether he was Senator or Majority Leader or President or what not. We maintained a relationship that was essentially simply that of two friends. I never, in the expression, "used" him really to promote myself journalistically. And he certainly never used me or attempted in any way to do so to promote himself politically. I got a great deal of information from him over the years in many ways, but it was largely sort of a process of osmosis. I didn't go as a journalist and say, "What do you think," or, "What's going to happen," nor did he as a politician say to me, "Now, you ought to look into this," and so on. It was a process of osmosis, that's all. We never had a typical journalist-politician relationship, I suppose, after that one incident I told you about.

M: Did you have occasion during this period to write any stories about Mr. Johnson as he was elected?

W: You mean after the period after he came to Congress?

M: Yes.

W: I don't recall that I ever wrote much about him as a person. You see, at that point I was on the national staff of the AP, and I was dealing more with national issues than personalities perhaps. I no doubt wrote something about him in connection with some issue or some problem, but I don't think I ever at that time wrote much about him just as Lyndon Johnson.

M: How would you rate Mr. Johnson as a Congressman?

W: He was a superb Congressman. As I said early, he simply was an enormously gifted man. In fact, on much reflection and making all due allowance for personal affection and so on, I regard him now as the most intuitively able politician I ever met. Therefore, yes, he was

a good Congressman. He was a good Congressman because he saw issues develop often before they really developed; because he was committed and engaged; and because, of course, right away he became a great protege of Franklin Roosevelt who was then President. All these things had a lot--put it this way. As a very junior Congressman he became somewhat senior rather quick in the sense of his achievement.

I recall, for example--I was not here then by the way--I was in New York on the war desk of the Associated Press. But before Pearl Harbor--I was down here sometimes in Washington of course--Mr. Roosevelt had a very serious problem about whether the military draft would be renewed. As you know, it was in fact only renewed by one vote almost on the eve of the Pearl Harbor attack. At any rate, Mr. Roosevelt at that time was making a great deal of sort of private use of Lyndon Johnson. By that I mean Lyndon Johnson, of course, was not then in the leadership of the House. Nevertheless, Mr. Roosevelt often leaned on him, particularly for inside information about the estimates of what the House would really do, and he did so in this case. He called Lyndon Johnson to the White House--a very young Congressman he was too, of course--and asked his advice about how he, Mr. Roosevelt, would best move in order to have the draft continued.

Lyndon Johnson told him, as he later told me, that he thought the wisest thing to do was to have the final appeal made to the House, not by the Secretary of the Army as he was then--that was Colonel Stimson--but rather by Cordell Hull, the Secretary of State. This seemed a little odd to the President, and he said, "Why would you do that, Lyndon?" He said, "Because, Mr. President, this is really a gut matter now and although Cordell Hull is not Secretary of the Army, he's a former member of Congress--of the House--and he has enormous good will there and enormous private respect. And it would come better from him." And in fact Mr. Roosevelt did ask Mr. Hull to make the final appeal. And in fact it may well have been the thing that put it over.

This is an illustration of Lyndon Johnson's almost intuitive grasp of how you do it politically. Normally one would have thought you wouldn't go to Mr. Hull, but he knew perfectly well in this case Hull would have more influence in the House, as an old patriarchal member of the House. That was the size of it.

Yes, he was extremely active in that sense and very able as a Congressman, although he really only came into his true self when he came to the Senate, I thought. The House was large, of course. Men got lost--even very able men--but the Senate is smaller, has a greater forum for debate, and that became Johnson's real cup of tea rightaway--the Senate.

M: Mr. White, since we have reached the Senate time, do you recall how many occasions that you met and talked with--?

W: Oh, in the Senate I saw him almost constantly. For years after I came back from the war

and went with the New York Times, I was assigned to the Senate, covered it, among others--principally me. Of course I, saw Lyndon Johnson daily in those days, because right away--he had been there scarcely any time before he became the Democratic Whip of the Senate. And of course as such he was a member of the leadership, and as such he was in touch with plans and purposes, and I of course saw him every day, I suppose--practically every day.

M: Do you recall some specific events or legislation that you contacted him on?

W: Oh yes, any number of it, any number of such instances. I was very much in touch with him about foreign policy issues always, because that happened to be my principal interest. And because he was in the leadership, although he was not overtly active in foreign policy, he was enormously important because of his role. I saw him on many, many of those issues. I also was very close to him in the sense of watching him in the passage of the first Civil Rights Bill--the one in '57, wasn't it. He himself really almost personally put that through, and I was very close to watching that operation. In fact, all the legislation of that period, I suppose one could say I saw it pretty closely because I was very much in touch with him.

M: Do any of these particularly come to mind as exemplifying to you his ability in the Senate?

W: Yes, I think probably the most striking one was, again, the Civil Rights Act of 1957. As you may remember in 1954, I believe it was, the Supreme Court had come down with their decision against school segregation. Lyndon Johnson, by the way, was one of the few Southerners who did not sign the Southern Manifesto against the courts. When the time came for this civil rights bill, as you know, it was ostensibly a Republican thing because General Eisenhower was President. But Johnson took the Administration's proposals and so altered them as to get a bill through. It was actually the most skillful single legislative job of leadership I ever saw, because Johnson of course had to deal with his Southern friends who had up to that point formed the basis really of his constituency in the Senate. And yet he left them on this in their view. But yet they never broke with him humanly. They never thought he was a traitor or renegade, and he never called them any names. But he managed to get this thing through with a bipartisan effort, and it was really--it's not now recognized how enormously hard that was. That was after all, with all its shortcomings, the first genuine civil rights measure since Reconstruction. And there's not doubt whatever that he primarily was responsible for it.

By this process of compromise, persuasion, all the things that everybody knows about him, he did a tremendous job on this. There's no doubt about it.

M: Mr. White, during this period do you think that you had any more special access to him than other journalists?

W: Yes, I guess there's no doubt about that. We were old friends and fellow Texans, and of course he trusted me. Yes, I guess I did, without any question, have a greater access than most people.

M: Do you recall other things besides the civil rights legislation where you contacted him, or he helped you to understand the inner-workings of the Senate?

W: Oh, yes, but that again was largely not a conscious process on either side--just a matter of observation and so on. I was often in his office in more or less private circumstances having a drink or two or something like that. I watched him operate in that sense off the floor as well as on. Again, though, I think whatever understanding I had of him and of his processes was not designed. It just happened because I was there and I watched him a lot and we were close personally and sympathetic often--usually in political views too. That is to say, he didn't have to push any door hard for me to see his purposes, most of which, had I been in his position, would have been my own.

M: Did he ask you during this Senate period for your opinions on any subjects or--?

W: Yes, very often. I'm not aware of how much effect my opinions had, but, yes, he certainly did. He very often, particularly and oddly asked me about my opinions on what he considered to be Southern issues, or issues likely to upset the South. He regarded me as somewhat more Southern than he was. I don't know why exactly this is so. Indeed during all his career I used to laugh and say he regarded me as a litmus paper. He would call me in sometimes about an issue, about a problem, that involved the South and ask my views. I might say he rarely followed them. But I think it's because he thought that somehow I had a little closer Southern connection or understanding. This, I think, is because of course I was an intimate friend of Southern Senators like Richard Russell and later John Stennis. So was the President, but I think somehow or other he regarded me as somewhat more symptomatic of Southern attitudes than he was, I suppose.

M: In your personal dealings with him, what do you think most dominated his thinking during this period, most concerned him?

W: Are you speaking now of the Senate period?

M: During the Senate.

W: I think what probably most of all concerned him--and this is what concerned him all his political life--was he honestly did always feel that he wished to be an agent for healing in the country, or an agent for reunion; an agent to get rid of the divisions following the Civil War, to get rid of the dichotomy, as he saw it, of two nations. Domestically what most concerned him was anything that he thought would reduce the abrasion, the sectional abrasion, in the country. You see, he was never a typical Southerner in the stereotyped

term, primarily because he didn't think that way, and secondarily because his part of Texas was not really Southern. The war there, if anything, was the war with Mexico.

But at any rate, domestically his great concern was truly--it really honestly was--to bind up to pull the country back, to get rid of what he considered to be sterile and outdated regional abrasions. But I think probably in his career as Senate Leader, a great deal of which, as you know, was spent as the leader of the Democratic Senate whereas there was a Republican President--Eisenhower--he spent a vast amount of effort there in assisting Eisenhower in foreign policy, because Johnson always felt that foreign policy was not a legitimate subject for partisan action or debate. This was very genuine with him. It is not too much to say that on many, many occasions in world affairs he saved President Eisenhower. There's no doubt about that. Those were his two interests.

M: Do you think that Mr. Johnson's cooperation in working with a Republican President, Mr. Eisenhower, affected his relations with other elected Democrats?

W: Oh, indeed it did. In that period many of the Democrats in the Senate were very angry at him, and they'd say, "Get in there and fight Eisenhower," and so on. He would reply that "I won't do it beyond the water's edge. It's a different thing." He would fight him domestically, but he wouldn't fight him on foreign affairs because he had a very traditional view of the proper role of the Presidency in foreign affairs; namely, he believed the President was responsible for them. He and Sam Rayburn, his great friend in the House, used to say many times, "You can have only one President at a time." Johnson's instinct was not to trouble the President in foreign affairs if he could possibly avoid it--and never in the middle of a foreign ctisis. Now, that had a lot of effect.

Yes, he almost barehandedly fought off Democratic rank-and-file demands for fighting Eisenhower on world affairs. And, of course, he went through some hard times because they got quite angry with him. On the other hand, it was bread on the waters because after he became President, General Eisenhower was enormously helpful to him in the same way.

M: Mr. White, do you recall through your personal associations with him any stories or events where you were with him that sort of typify him?

W: Oh yes, I recall many. I will try and select some. One of his political techniques was what I used to call "keeping the other fellow off balance." He was not essentially a witty man as a person, I think, but he had this very strong and acute sense of irony which he used very well--irony and understatement.

I recall, for example--there's a thousand--but one--when he was Minority Leader of the Senate and Senator Taft was the Majority Leader and I was with the New York Times I was paying a great deal more attention in print to Senator Taft for the obvious reason

that he was in the Majority. One day in my office, Senator Johnson called me personally--no secretary, no intermediary--of course, we were very much on first-name basis and had been for many years--and he said very formally, "Is this Mr. William White?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Mr. White, this is Senator Johnson."

I said, "Good morning, Senator Johnson."

He said, "I realize, Mr. White, that in representing the New York Times in the Senate you're very busy, and I realize also that youtre very busy with Senator Taft but," he said, "If an occasion comes in which you think you might see me, could I come and call on you."

I said, "Certainly, Senator."

He said, "Now, mind you, if it would be more convenient, I'd be glad to call on you in Senator Taft's office."

He often did this sort of thing. He had, again, a great use of irony--and many, many of those things over the years. He would joke with me about this or that and the other. And he always, however--he used humor, but he always had a basic point. He rarely used humor just because it was humorous. When he did a thing like that, what he was really saying was, "Now, look here, don't you think you ought to cover the Democratic side of this a little more." It's not, by the way, altogether personal--he was thinking about his party too. He often did things like that all through his career. That sort of fairly mordant humor was what he used very often.

M: Any others of these that you recall?

W: Good heavens, I have so many! Let's try to come back--at the moment, I'm blind on that. There are so many I can't compart them in my mind just now. But over all these years, of course, there have been hundreds of very amusing episodes with him in which--.

He had another one; he had a kind of strong characteristic, as I said, of underplaying things, of the use of irony in reverse. For example, during all these fights--the tremendous fights over Viet Nam policies, and I was, as you know, supporting that policy, as indeed I had under President Kennedy, too. I would sometimes write a column--my wife and I saw them, him and Mrs. Johnson, very often at the White House, probably during those years, almost once a week at least in a very private way; and whenever I'd have a column, say, attacking Senator Fulbright and one of the doves, he'd often say to me, "Well, you did fairly well about that, but then I saw you broke and ran at

the last." Which, of course, he was saying he thought quite the reverse. He used all that sort of thing.

He constantly sort of gingered up his friends by kidding around, but really suggesting, "Why don't you do more?" You see, he was a perfectionist about everything, and while he genuinely appreciated anybody's support, he never did quite think it was enough, no matter what it was. It ought to have been a little more, or it ought to have been slanted that way. He never complained, he simply did it in the humorous way. This was very typical of his operation in a private way--those things I've just said.

M: If any of these occur to you as we're going, you just go right ahead and insert them.

W: I will.

M: I did want to ask you one more question about his Senate career, and this is relating to your book The Citadel, the story of the U.S. Senate which was published in 1958. You have a chapter there on why not very many Senators become President, in which you basically explain the different orientation of the Executive Branch and the Senate--that the Presidency is administrative and current--and generally they don't make good Presidents, and vice versa. How do you feel about this now?

W: I don't withdraw the statement. I think he's an exception to it. Indeed, I think actually Harry Truman was an exception to that as a generalization. I think generally what I said then, I would repeat now in the philosophic sense that they're very different institutions and, on the whole, demand different personal characteristics and skills.

I'm not attempting to defend the book, but I might point this out. You see, Lyndon Johnson was never in a sense a typical Senator in the first place because nearly all of his time there he had been in a very urgent leadership role--which was in a sense administrative, in the sense that he had to marshal forces, he had to reach in his own mind what really became collective decisions later, rather in the sense that a President does. I think another way for me to put it would be to say that had he not had the accident of being--indeed, actually unique, as a uniquely powerful Senate leader, he probably wouldn't have been a good President. I think it taught him a lot. I think the general run in the Senate, the strictures I made in the book I stand by.

M: Do you recall when you first heard Mr. Johnson mention his consideration for running for the Presidency?

W: I never heard him mention it. I never heard him mention it voluntarily, that is to say. In that period beginning very early in 1960 when he was manifestly considering it, thinking about it--I say manifestly, simply because I knew him so well--he never voluntarily discussed this with me, and I don't think really with any other close friend. And I think the

reason was that he was ambivalent about it then, and he was later indeed. In that whole period he had a desire to do it and a desire not to do it, that is, to run. It was partly purely personal, subjective and partly objective. He had for example--I said he never voluntarily--when I did of course sometimes mention it to him, he was reluctant to talk about it even in private. But the impression I got was very firm--and I know it was correct--was that one of his concerns was, first of all, he's highly rational, and I think he had genuine questions about whether he could make it--a, the nomination; b, the election.

Also, he did have a tremendous sense of responsibility to the Senate because while he got away with a lot there as a way of imperious leadership, he also owed it a lot, and he knew that--he owed the Senate a lot. He was very reluctant, and, indeed, you know, he never did openly go out and fight for it until the convention--he was reluctant to go out because he said to me once, "If I start running all over the country making political speeches with my shirttail out--that was one of his favorite expressions, meaning being too excitable--I'll obviously neglect my work here, and I am the Leader of the Senate, and I might blow this whole damned party apart." And he was under a great handicap there because Kennedy and Symington were able to go out as they wished, and he couldn't, really.

But to answer your question more succinctly, no, he never voluntarily brought that up to me at any point. I know other friends of his who were urging him. I, by the way, never urged him to do anything. I didn't think that was my role. If he asked my opinion, I gave it--that goes, by the way, for the time of the Presidency.

But I never said to him except on one occasion voluntarily, "I think you ought to do such-and-such." This, by the way, was in the time of Joseph McCarthy when I was very, very upset about McCarthy, and I thought he was destroying civil liberties in this country. By the way--I don't recant it now--I think he was very dangerous. I went to Lyndon Johnson once and said, "You really must do something about this damned fellow."

He said, "Bill, that's a good point, but let me explain something to you. In the present atmosphere, if I commit the Democratic party to the destruction of McCarthy--" what he meant really was censure, or something of that sort, "first of all, we will lose and he will win in the present atmosphere of the Senate. He'll be more powerful than ever. At his juncture I'm not about to commit the Democratic party to a high school debate on the subject, resolved that Communism is good for the United States, with my party taking the affirmative." What he meant was, the atmosphere was so oversimplified that McCarthy would win and then it would be said that he had brought the whole Senate to its knees.

Now, later on, Johnson did indeed go after him and he got him--got him in the sense that he brought about the creation of the select committee that investigated and censured McCarthy. But he waited until the atmosphere was right because he was afraid.

Incidentally, he was never afraid of McCarthy. Put it practically speaking, McCarthy could not have hurt him much in Texas, no matter--. First of all, McCarthy never would have dared take him on directly, any more than, let's say, he would have Taft. But this was an illustration, by the way--I think an important one--of the profound common sense approach of Johnson to national issues.

I told this story, by the way, years later to Hugh Gaitskill in London. Gaitskill was then leader of the labor party. First of all, I called on Gaitskill and asked him how things were going. He said, "Well, as an illustration I've got on my desk here a report from the Royal Commission that suggests an easing of the homosexuality laws in England. I'm sympathetic with this, but I'm not about to take this to Commons and say I'm in favor of homosexuality." Then I told him this story about Johnson. He laughed and said, "I'd like to meet him," which he later did. That's the only occasion in my association with the President in short that I ever recall volunteering any advice to him about what he should do.

M: Do you think his assessments of the possibilities of a Southerner becoming President were involved in his considerations about running for--?

W: Oh, I'm sure they were. I'm sure that he had a lively doubt that he could make it, that he could win. I did at the time. I doubted it very much. He never asked me, but I would have doubted he could have won. Looking back on it, I think he could. But that's not relevant with what you asked.

M: Were you personally very much surprised by his accepting the number two slot with Kennedy?

W: Not greatly, although that sounds a little like I'm second-guessing. Not really, no, because one reads a thousand great explanations of that situation. What really happened was this: Kennedy and Johnson, contrary, again to a lot of public understanding, were at no point--not even there bitter enemies, not even at the convention. After Kennedy had been nominated, television had tarried a massive picture of a powerful urban boss coalition that had put him over, which was essentially true. Kennedy got to thinking about it, quite naturally, overnight and thought he needed on the ticket somebody to blur the image, and Johnson was a natural. He was essentially rural. He was a Protestant. He was not associated with big city machine. Kennedy went to Johnson and in effect--I think I'm giving it almost exactly literally as Johnson gave it to me--said to him in substance: "Now, Lyndon, you're going to be needed on this ticket. If you don't go on, I'll lose, the party will lose, and you'll be to blame, and I'll say so." And Johnson took it.

Kennedy, also--and this by the way, it's quite just--it's quite a just analysis--Johnson after all had spent many years as an openly unifying force, to unify the party and the country. He could hardly say at that point, "No, I won't go on," because

Kennedy really put it to him in the sense of national union, you see, that he needed him for that. That was about what happened there.

M: Did he ever tell you anything clarifying all the stories surrounding how he was approached for this?

W: On this matter?

M: Yes.

W: Only what I told you. I believe he said Kennedy called him on the phone. I'm not certain whether he called him on the phone or whether they met in one of the hotel rooms, but the substance of it was what I just told you.

M: Mr. White, now being in his Vice Presidential years, do you recall what occasions and what subjects you discussed and met with Mr. Johnson during this period?

W: That pretty well covers everything because I saw a lot of him, again socially, my wife and I, and him with Bird Johnson. Of course, in that time Mr. Johnson was not creating policy and was not active in it. Again, as I say, these meetings I had with him were again primarily personal and social. Whatever came up in a way of public affairs was incidental to it.

I do remember notably when President Kennedy sent him to Asia--Johnson--and when Johnson came back and made a very, very strong report to the President on the necessity to stand in Viet Nam--.

By the way, anybody who was surprised later on his own policy shouldn't have been after he read that report. I remember Lyndon Johnson discussing that with me--and, by the way, after President Kennedy had told him it was all right. He was very scrupulous as Vice President not to do anything that would embarrass the President. Vice President Johnson then showed me the report after he had the approval of Kennedy, and I recall this very vividly. This of course was a major moral and emotional commitment by Johnson to this policy before he became President.

When President Kennedy at length after the Bay of Pigs fiasco decided later--you know, we had the direct confrontation with the Russians over the missiles in Cuba--and President Kennedy at their final meeting told various members of the National Security Council if they wished they could talk to their columnist friends, the idea being of course to feed out the Administration's reasoning and so on. In the natural order of things, I knew Vice President Johnson and we went to his house for lunch at the Elms and with Senator Russell of Georgia. Vice President Johnson told me exactly what had happened, I presume, why, how serious it was, how grave it was. You see, many people here on the

inside didn't know if we were going into nuclear war. Vice President Johnson as always, even in private was absolutely correct. He wholeheartedly endorsed the President's decision, made no comments of his own.

Senator Russell, on the contrary, made it very clear to me--by the way, the fourth person there was Bird Johnson, just the four of us at lunch--that he, Russell, had thought that the President should actually go into Cuba with troops and remove the missiles to be certain they were gone. I, by the way, parenthethically was strong in my own opinion as a journalist. And I strongly suspected that Lyndon Johnson's opinion, although he never said so--he never said anything except "I support exactly what the President has done," and that's all. That sort of thing I saw him, but those were rather exceptional things.

Generally in that period when he was Vice President, I simply saw him as a friend. We rarely had much discussion of politics and public affairs. When we did have it, I was glad to hear it, but I never asked him for any special information, nor did he ever give me any.

M: Did you go on any of these trips with him?

W: No, I never did go on any of those.

M: Before we get away from the Cuban missile crisis, there have been several very recent publications on this. Do you agree with some of their analyses of what happened?

W: You mean in the final one, or the first one? The big crisis.

M: Yes.

W: I've not read all of them because, really, I've sort of had that bit. I went all through it. I'm not an expert. I can't be a critic on these various books because frankly I've not read many of them. I've not read much about it. I believe I know what happened. I've just gone on from there. I'm not in a position to make any comment usefully about it.

M: Did you see much evidence during this period of the Vice Presidency of the frustrations of being the Number Two man?

W: Yes, quite a bit, although I think really that legend has become slightly inflated. I never saw Lyndon Johnson at any point act as though he were desperately unhappy, or even desperately restless. It was, of course, a confining role for him. He had been a man of immense power in the Senate. I think to say that he was terribly frustrated is too strong. To say that he was troubled often is certainly, I think, a correct thing to say. There were things that happened in the Administration that, knowing him so well, I knew he didn't agree with, although he never said so--not even in private.

I know, for example, that the Bay of Pigs in which, by the way, by accident he was not involved. He was not in Washington when the decision was taken. I know him well enough to know he wouldn't have gone at all, or he'd have gone with a lot of force that day. But he never said anything about it. He was remarkably loyal to Kennedy, even in private.

And by the way, Kennedy was to him--President Kennedy, I saw President Kennedy a great deal because we too had been friends, although not so close, in Kennedy's Senate days. I never saw on either side--I think it's a great pity about this too because a lot of rather excited rubbish was written about this--I think Kennedy and Johnson behaved with remarkable magnanimity toward each other. Kennedy was magnaminous toward him. Johnson was loyal. So the story of the immense frustration of the Vice Presidency years is much overdrawn. Of course, obviously Johnson, having been a doer so long, found this a little confining. There's no doubt about that. I was amused at him at times because he was almost excessively correct. He would not get into a picture with the President unless he was asked by the President. He would not go near the White House socially on any occasion unless he was asked, of course. He was extremely correct, and I think, probably, more correct than any Vice President I've ever known.

M: Why do you think he was?

W: I think it was because he thought he ought to be. The President, in spite of that innovating and reformist side of his personality, also has many strongly traditional views about decorum, oddly enough. Although he's known as the great extrovert and what not, he actually has a profound sense of propriety, particularly about public affairs and public office--more so, again, than any President I've known.

There are two sides to him. The innovative, the urgent, aggressive side of Johnson has been rather overstated. The other side, the traditional side--in many ways he's a very traditional man. He has totally traditional views, as I said earlier, of the President's role in foreign policy. In a shorthand way, you might say in foreign policy, he was always a conservative. Of course you know, in domestic policy he was anything but. But one of his strong attributes was his sense of propriety about the office or any public office. Also I think he was very sensitive that somebody would say, because he had been so powerful before and Kennedy had not--after all, this was really a case of a lieutenant and a major general reversing roles, you know. When Johnson was in the Senate, he was so much more powerful than Kennedy that there's no possible comparison, and then it was suddenly turned around. And I think he just wanted to be awfully careful that nobody could say he was pushing his way into anything.

M: Do you think Mr. Johnson was aware of any bad relations between his staff and Mr. Kennedy's staff?

W: Oh, yes, of course he was. He couldn't have been unaware. Yes, I think of course he was aware, and so was Kennedy. They were both quite troubled about it. Neither wanted it. Both tried to stop it. President Kennedy told me more than once that nobody would ever make any mileage with him by attacking Johnson, and Johnson told me the same. Certainly, Johnson was troubled by it. I don't know what either man could have done about it because people develop followers who become more Catholic, so to speak, than the Pope, you know--more belligerent, more combative, more ambitious. Yes, that happened all the time, the abrasion or what not between the two staffs. It troubled Johnson and it troubled Kennedy, and that's about all I can tell you about it. I don't think either was able to do anything effective about it.

M: Did you feel that there were some principals involved, particular people where this was the most trouble?

W: I think in the sense if a principle can be defined as kind of a blend of belief and ambition, I think some of Johnson's people, and without being stained by private motive, honestly believed he was abler than Kennedy; that he should be listened to more and so on.

I think some of Kennedy's people--I think Kennedy's people fell into two sets. There were those who were associated with Bob Kennedy who had a violent and irrational dislike of Johnson, always--tried to cut him down just to cut him down. Then there was another set of Kennedy people, I think, who received him with more objectivity but who had a belief that Johnson was bad for Kennedy, that he was associated with the South and oil and what not. It was a very complex affair. Put it this way. I think that partisans on either side were mostly motivated by mixed motives, some of which weren't very pleasant, some of which were understandable; and that some of the partisans on either side were not motivated by anything except what they thought was the good for the country.

M: Mr. White, I'd like to ask you some questions about the Johnson book which Mr. Johnson approved as his official biography. How did you happen to get started on this?

W: I don't know that he did that. I don't know that he approved it as official. He may have. I'm not aware of it.

M: I was reading an article in the New York Times that said so.

W: I think that's incorrect. I'm not aware that he ever made it official in any way. In fact, I know he didn't.

M: All right, I stand corrected. How did you happen to get started on this project and when?

W: My word, I can't remember exactly when in terms of dates. It was not long after his accession to the office of the Presidency. I had, of course, for years vaguely planned a

book about Lyndon Johnson. I had that in my mind, and various publishers had approached me for years about a book. My intention was one day to write a book when I got around to it. When this tragedy occurred in Dallas, the President came back here as President--Mr. Johnson. My wife and I and Abe Fortas and his wife were at the Elms where he was then living just after he came back, and I saw the enormous and unique burden he was carrying because of the aftermath of the assassination, and the dreadful concern in the country. I had a great concern for the country's stability as, of course, anybody did who was aware of what was going on.

First of all, I thought that there was the greatest need to give the country, and particularly the world, legitimate reassurance about Lyndon Johnson; that he was in fact an able man, that he wasn't just a Texas cowboy and so on, because I thought it was vital to this country and vital to our place in the world.

In short I decided to do right away a book I would certainly have done on one day or another. I decided to do it quickly, and I did it as quickly as I could without rushing through it. I was approached by various publishers, as one always is in those cases, and finally decided to do it for Houghton-Mifflin. The reason I titled it The Professional, I was doing a profile of a politician as a politician. I did not intend it or offer it as definitive biography. I intended to show what this man's capacity was in these circumstances, his professional capacity, and that's why I called it The Professional.

I, by the way, at no point discussed it with him other than in the sense that I asked questions, like to recall things. At no point did he ever ask me to see it, did he ever give me any suggestions about it. I think when I told him one night the title, The Professional, that he blanched a little. I think he wouldn't have had that title. Bill Moyers, by the way, was there and Bill Moyers said, "I don't like that title." I said, "That's too bloody bad." The President said nothing, but smiled.

I think it fair to say about him, though--and only fair to say--that at no point in the writing of that book did he attempt in any way to influence anything I did or didn't do in it; nor did he ever see it until it was in print; nor did he ever ask to see it. He was very correct about it. He wouldn't bring it up, and we were meeting constantly. He never asked me about anything about it. If I brought it up, I brought it up only to say, "What did you say to so-and-so, what did you do to so-and-so, back in such-and-such?" Indeed, he didn't give me much time. I asked him for two hours once, and he said, "I can't do it. I can give you two million dollars quicker." In other words, the book was entirely my own. He had nothing whatever to do with, except he was its subject.

M: What did you use as sources on this?

W: Mainly up here where I remembered. I did very little research because it was not that kind of a book. It was intended to be what I had called it, The Professional. It was a study of

a professional politician, not about the collateral things, but about him and his profession and his work.

M: Mr. White, the book was published, I think, in the spring of 1964 which would coincide with his campaigning for the election.

W: Yes, there was a lively suspicion among many people that it was a campaign book. It was never meant to be. My biggest concern, as I said earlier, was to present him abroad in what I thought was a fair--now obviously, I didn't go out of my way in this book to attack the warts--the personal warts. I don't think now it was relevant to what I had in mind.

I had, by the way, an interesting experience with that book. I had clipping service. No professional book critic--literary critic--gave it a bad notice. Many of my fellow journalists did. I think they misread my intention.

Incidentally, I had absolutely no concern about the 1964 campaign. In the first place, any sensible man knew he'd win anyhow. It was obviously the country has never under these circumstances thrown out a man who has taken over in this way. But the book was a study of competence--is what I meant it to be--not a study of who's a nice fellow or a good fellow or bad fellow. And that was the spirit in which I wrote it, and really, I think if one reads it with that understanding, he'll see that that was what I was doing. In any case, he had nothing to do with it whatever at any point, nor tried to have.

M: After Mr. Johnson saw the book, did he ever indicate to you he didn't agree with any of your assessments?

W: No, he said to me once, "I'm afraid, Bill, it won't sell," after it was out.

I said, "Why is that?"

He said, "Well, you never undressed me," meaning I'd never cut him up much.

I said, "Well, I never meant to cut you up personally. It wasn't that kind of book." That's all he ever said about it.

M: Do you think that Mr. Johnson has ever sort of determined how he wanted people to see him even if it didn't necessarily correspond with exactly how events happened?

W: Yes, I think that's true. I think that, by the way, is not unique in public men. Yes, of course, he did. But even here, I think it's fair to say I don't think this sprang from a petty motive. I don't think it sprang from, as many people have suggested, from sheer vanity--personal vanity--on his part. His problem was always--what he did was nearly all his operations were much more objective in spirit than most people realized. Namely, he

wanted people to see not so much Lyndon Johnson personally right, let's say about Viet Nam, as to accept as right the consideration on which Lyndon Johnson had worked, had operated. Yes, it's true, he had plenty of vanity. He has got plenty of it, but I don't think this was a personal vanity so much on his part as it was his terrible desire to get the country to see what he thought he had to do in Viet Nam. Of course there's personal vanity in it. One might call it a more impersonal vanity. You see, he has always had a lot of the school teacher in him, instructor, the lecturer. Whenever he tried to shape the news, so to speak, and so on, or manage it, whatever the term is, it was not really so much for Lyndon Johnson as a politician, I don't think, as it was that he wanted his policies to succeed.

This brings me to a point that I think is extremely important. I've never known a man in public life more able to, let's say, protect, defend issues and less able to protect and defend himself. His capacity to put his own best foot forward was very low. He never did learn, oddly enough, in all these political years to look after Lyndon Johnson--I mean Lyndon Johnson personally. A great deal of his trouble politically was that he could do one very well and never could do the other.

M: Mr. White, during the period from '64 to '66, you had the reputation as being the Washington political columnist--

W: I don't know about that.

M: I think it was primarily because it was felt that you had the inside track to the President. Did you have many stories that broke first in your columns during this period?

W: A good many, but they were not so much stories as indications of attitudes. And not one of them ever came in a journalistic way because I knew him well. Because when I saw him, I knew what he was thinking about. I often wrote things, "Lyndon Johnson will do such-and-such" without the slightest word from him that he would do it because I knew him well enough, that's all. I knew what he would certainly do in a given--no, I never had a so-called exclusive in the while period. He never said to me, "Look, I'm going to do this, I'm not going to do that, and why don't you write about it."

Incidentally, he never in his entire life asked me to write but one column, and that was about Hubert Humphrey, oddly enough. The 1964 campaign he called me at home one day early in the morning, himself--no secretary again--and said, "Have you seen the paper?"

I said, "No, my God, I haven't gotten up."

"Well, why aren't you up?"

He always did that. "You should be up."

"Well, all right, just a minute." He read me this little story in one of the papers that Bill Miller, the Republican Vice Presidential candidate, had suggested that Humphrey was soft on Communism.

Johnson said, "Do you believe that?"

I said, "Of course, I don't believe that."

"Well, why don't you do something about it," he said. I did. I wrote a column defending Humphrey. That was the only time in all our association he ever asked me to write anything.

In short, that business of being "in" was a stereotype. I was in, yes, in the sense that I was a friend. But I never went over there with a pad in my hand to write stories or to get information. I got information, but I got it mainly through my knowledge of him.

M: Did you think that you had a better relation with him during this period than, say, most of the other journalists?

W: I certainly had a closer one. What I'm attempting to say is that this was totally personal. I didn't go over there with all the burden on him and sit around trying to get new stories. I recognized when he'd talk about a situation how he felt often. I knew in my mind exactly what he'd do and I was usually right. But it wasn't a question of my going over for journalistic purposes.

M: Did the President ever float what is called in the news "trial ballons" in your column?

W: No, never, never in his career. I wouldn't have done it anyhow, and he knew it. No, unless one means that I often floated things of what he was going to do that were true. But, no, he never attempted to use me that way or any other way.

M: Actually, it would be a way of getting public reaction. I don't necessarily mean this in the sense--

W: No, I understand what you mean. I can think of no occasions in which he tried in any way to get me to do something even if it were true. He never attempted any way to use me as a journalist.

M: Mr. White, he's a pretty subtle man sometimes. Do you think--

W: I'm sure that in the sense that he knew--he never said to me at any time I should or should

not have written this or that. And I know I wrote things at times that embarrassed him.

M: Can you think of any of these that he particularly--

W: Let me try to put--I don't know how to express this any better. He called me one day on the phone about something. And we both knew we were never going to explain to other people the nature of this relationship in the sense that I'm a journalist. He said to me finally, "These bastards will never understand our relationship." What it was was we were friends. We also thought much alike. I often thought exactly what he thought about a given thing. But there was not any business of master and servant or journalist and politician except incidentally--I don't know how to put it any better than that, any more clearly. It is entirely true that I supported him generally, although what has been forgotten, and he knew this as well, I very often opposed him domestically even in those years. Nobody remembers that part of it.

M: What issues are you thinking of?

W: I thought he went too far on the Poverty Program. I was against things like rent supplement. I thought that was extreme. He knew that. I wrote that. I often said it to him when he asked me. But essentially I supported him as a world leader.

M: Mr. White, what do you think, through your personal relations with the President, were his prime worries, concerns?

W: The same things I told you about early when he was a young man in Kleberg's office. Exactly the same. He had a real thing about the poor, most of all about education. He was almost fanatical about education, about medical care. He was an old-fashioned, almost a Populist, in the domestic field. And he was an old-fashioned conservative in the foreign field. A very odd mixture.

M: From about 1966 on,, Mr. White, the criticism of Mr. Johnson--

(phone interruption)

(end of tape)

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By William S. White

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C, 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, W. S. White, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder, and all literary property rights, will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by terms of this instrument available for research as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

3. A revision of this stipulation governing access to the material for research may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States, or his designee, if it appears desirable.

4. The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

Signed by William S. White on Feb. 3, 1972

Accepted by Harry H. Middleton for the Archivist of the United States on August 6, 1974

Accession Number 74-270

Original deed of Gift on File at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 2313 Red River, Austin, Texas 78705