INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: THOMAS G. WICKER

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: Mr. Wicker's office, Washington Bureau, New York Times

Tape 1 of 1

F: First of all, I know you came out of Hamlet, North Carolina, which I think is a very happy place to have been born. I've often wished that I'd come from something a little more unique, you know, than just a proper name. But, as that may be, how did you get to Washington, briefly?

W: Well, I worked on a number of newspapers in North Carolina, the largest of which was the Winston-Salem Journal. I first went there in 1951, and the executive editor of the Winston-Salem Journal at that time was Wallace Carroll. He left and went to Washington as the assistant chief of the Washington Bureau of the New York Times, assistant to James Reston.

I stayed on in Winston-Salem for a number of years.

F: Winston-Salem. Is the New York Times running a farm club down there?

W: Well, in a way. But I stayed down there for a long time, and ultimately, early in 1957, I was sent to Washington by the Winston-Salem Journal as its first Washington correspondent. The idea was that they would send a different man up every year.

F: It hadn't had one prior to that time?

W: No. Well, sometimes we would contract with a bureau that already

existed in Washington to do something for us.

F: Right.

W: But we hadn't sent our own man up. The idea was that we would send a man up basically to cover the congressional session, and a different man each year [would go]. I was the first.

That was, first place, my first real association of any kind with Lyndon B. Johnson. As you may remember, 1957 was the year of the first civil rights bill.

F: Right.

W: Which I was naturally interested in, as a southern correspondent. More than that, I went on from there and spent a year at Harvard as a Nieman Fellow. Went back to Winston-Salem; went to Nashville, Tennessee; all of which is irrelevant except that as a result of my work, I think, in Washington in 1957, ultimately in 1960, Wallace Carroll called me up and asked me to come to work in Washington for the New York Times. So I came back to Washington as a correspondent for the New York Times in May of 1960.

F: Now, The Tennesseean wasn't Silliman Evans' paper?

W: Yes, it was.

F: It was. So you got some notion at least of Texas personalia by that time.

W: That's right. Silliman Evans, Sr., was dead at that time in 1959. But Silliman, Jr., was the publisher of the paper before his death.

F: We always felt kind of a cousinship with . . .

W: That's right. And Silliman, Jr., was a very strong supporter of

Lyndon Johnson for president in 1960. But I remember, at that time, I was very much for the renomination of Adlai Stevenson.

F: Yes.

W: And I remember arguing frequently with Silliman, who, as you know, ultimately was a strong supporter of Mr. Johnson in 1960.

F: Did you go to Los Angeles? Or had you left the paper by then?

W: No. Because I came to work for the Times in May of 1960. The conventions were in July, as I recall.

F: Yes.

W: And I was the rookie in the bureau. It was a good break for me though, because, the way it happened, practically everyone in the bureau was a veteran, so to speak, and had scheduled their vacations for August, following the conventions.

F: Yes.

W: I was covering Congress. As it turned out, the Congress came back, you remember, in 1960, for the "Rump Session," so-called. As the rookie in the office, I was the only one around and I covered that entire session, Kennedy and Nixon and Johnson.

It was a great break for me. I got into a lot of things in that August that I would not have, had I been on vacation.

F: You got both a thorough education and thorough work-out.

W: That's right. I sure did.

F: Did you see Mr. Johnson, personally, during those Senate years?

W: Yes. In 1957, when I was working for the Winston-Salem Journal, he was the majority leader, of course, and that civil rights bill

was the big issue of that year, and, as a southern correspondent, I covered it. I was introduced to LBJ very early, I remember, by George Reedy who was then working as--I don't know what George's actual title was at that time, but he did most of what a press secretary would do for a senator.

F: Yes.

W: So he introduced me to Senator Johnson, and Senator Johnson at that time, as you may know, held frequent backgrounders with the Capitol press. We saw a good deal of him. I don't ever remember interviewing him privately, but I think we were on a personal basis. I think he knew who I was.

F: Was he fairly approachable in those days?

W: Oh, very much so. Very much indeed.

F: He gave you, you thought, a reasonable amount of good information?

W: Yes. And, as you know, the custom in the Senate, then and now, is that just before the session opens in the morning, the majority leader and the minority leader always are at their desks, and the press comes in, and they hold a very brief news conference. So you could see him every day without fail that way.

F: Did Johnson show that proclivity for getting strung out in those days and really talking well beyond the time that should have been allotted, or did he stay to his schedule?

W: To the press, you mean?

F: Yes.

W: Well, he wouldn't in those morning sessions at his desk there, that

is, at his senator's desk on the floor. But he would hold rather garrulous backgrounders in his office sometimes. He had this fabulous office; I'm sure you know it used to be known as the Taj Mahal.

F: Yes.

W: He would gather in there a whole group of people, and talk to them. I think at that time he had a number of correspondents from the New York Times and other larger papers--Bill White is an example, people of that kind--with whom he met on an even more private, personal basis. But, of course, I wasn't one of those.

F: Yes. Straighten me out. Frank Graham had left by now.

W: That's right. Frank Graham had left the United States Senate. He was defeated in 1950; served on until January, 1951.

F: I knew him fairly well.

What was your impression? I know there's a tendency to rationalize after a dozen years. What was your impression, as a southern correspondent coming to Washington, of Mr. Johnson's position?

W: My impression, like every Capitol Hill correspondent at that time, was that he was a splendid leader; you know, really a terrific leader of the Senate [and] was getting things done there.

In 1957--my recollection now after all these years--everyone thought that he was maneuvering for the Democratic nomination in 1960. I think perhaps I felt a little more strongly than most that he might get it.

Curiously enough, at that time, I had very little interest in or

appreciation of John F. Kennedy. I was very much a Stevensonite. But even though I favored the renomination of Stevenson in 1960, I realized, even then, it was unlikely that he could win. Stevenson was not a winner in that sense.

F: Yes. When a man has been to the well twice and turned back, it's hard to sell.

W: That's right. And I recall writing a piece at that time for the Winston-Salem Journal editorial page, an analytical piece, in which I thought that that 1957 Civil Rights Bill, if Johnson carried it through successfully, would make a contender of him. He needed to get, in effect, the racial stain of the South off of him and I thought that would do it.

It was curious that both Kennedy and Johnson used that bill for their presidential purposes. And my recollection is that they did exactly the same thing for precisely the opposite purposes. I don't think this is too obscure; anyone who looks into this will know about that bill: Johnson voted for the Jury Trial Amendment and against Part III, with the idea that he would become acceptable to the northern liberals.

F: Yes.

W: Kennedy voted for Jury Trial, but against Part III, with the idea that that would make him acceptable to the southern conservatives.

F: Yes. They both had the same purposes.

W: Exactly the same vote, but they were looking at it differently.

F: Did you find, among your southern newspapermen who were capitol correspondents, a tendency for them to differ from the official line

of the papers? In other words, most of the papers, as I knew the southern newspaper publishers at that time, were still pretty much on a hold-the-line basis, and even Johnson's compromise, which was, of course, denounced by a lot of northern liberals as a watered down version, was looked upon in the South as the fact that Johnson had gone too far.

W: I think that's true. I don't remember too many of the southern correspondents. One, the most obvious I think, was Frank Vanderlinden who represented a whole group of southern papers. He was quite conservative, as were they. Morris Cunningham of the Memphis paper, I can't remember which one, was quite conservative. Jim Free of Birmingham, I think, as southerners go, is quite liberal; certainly more so than the Birmingham paper. I was. Bruce Jolly, of the Greensboro Daily News, at that time, was I thought more liberal than most. Those are the only ones I remember having day-to-day contact [with].

F: There wasn't any feeling then, among the southern correspondents, that Johnson, in a sense, was a traitor to his section, but was a man who was trying to outgrow it?

W: I don't think so. And all of those fellows were pretty sophisticated in their knowledge of what went on around the Congress. The idea of being a traitor to the South, it just wouldn't come up in that group.

F: Right.

W: They were politically more knowledgeable than that.

F: Okay. So you came back here, then, in 1960. What was the climate in

the Senate like in that late summer of 1960? You've got some principal contenders there. It must have been, the Senate is really a forum for the presidency at that time.

W: Oh, absolutely. It was quite awkward, because there was Senator Kennedy, the presidential nominee, who was really one of the rank and file of the Senate.

F: Yes.

W: And there was the vice presidential nominee, Mr. Johnson, who was majority leader. And Mr. Nixon, who could have, had he chosen to come in, presided over some of those sessions as vice president. In fact, my memory's vague now, but it seems to me the Democrats set something up so that Nixon had to come in, possibly in order to cast a tie-breaking vote. But it was difficult. It caused great crowds of tourists, and the galleries were always full.

F: Mr. Johnson was going to give up a certain amount of power regardless of whether he was elected or not elected.

W: That's right. That's exactly so. And I'd have to go back and look at my stories, but it seems to me that that did cause some difficulty. I know that Mr. Johnson, as majority leader, was instrumental in defeating a Republican motion to bring up some civil rights vote. I've forgotten precisely the details. But it was, I remember, Hugh Scott [of Pennsylvania that] brought it up. The idea was to embarrass the new Democratic leadership. Johnson was instrumental in quickly and efficiently moving to table that and kill it, rather than let it drag on for several days and be embarrassing. My recollection is that presidential candidate

Kennedy thought that Johnson had been too abrupt and had damaged them. Kennedy himself, as you may recall, was involved at that time in trying--he was heading the conferees--to work out a minimum wage bill, which they couldn't do. They ended in a disagreement. Kennedy didn't use that issue much. We also had a Medicare vote in there.

F: Yes. Did you cover any of that campaign personally?

W: Yes. That was the first national campaign I had been in for the New York Times, and I covered it quite extensively. I traveled with Henry Cabot Lodge, the Republican vice presidential candidate, and I made a couple of trips with Mr. Johnson.

F: Was Henry Cabot Lodge, in a sense, as unsophisticated a candidate as the press made him seem? Was that a fair gauge? He always looked the [part]; you know, he was the super-sophisticate by background, with his long time [heritage]. Well, no one has to identify the position of the Lodges in America. But he was good at putting his foot in his mouth, apparently.

W: Well, only once, on the Negro in the Cabinet. I wasn't with him at that time. I think Lodge, in retrospect, looks better and better. The thing he got the most criticism for was running a very lazy campaign. But I think that was more in contrast to Nixon and Kennedy and Johnson than it was in fact.

F: Who were all kind of hyperthyroid.

W: Right. And I think it's generally accepted as historically true now that Nixon worked himself into exhaustion and made a lot of bad judgments on account of it. And you saw how Nixon ran in 1968, very

much in the Lodge mode. When you think that so much is done by television anyway, I'm not sure that Lodge was not perhaps a little more clued in than the others thought. And Nixon and Kennedy were trying to make this big thing about which one had the most vigor.

I think Lodge felt probably under less pressure than any of those three to prove himself. As an old veteran and the kind of family he represented, I think he was the sort of fellow who said, "Well, you can take me or leave me." And he got a very good reception. I traveled with him a lot. He was coming off his U.N. experience, and the crowds really went for him. My major criticism of him as a candidate, at that time, was that, while all candidates tend to make the same speeches, he really did it relentlessly. He made the same speech to a hundred people in some small town public square as he did at the big Kansas City Municipal Auditorium, when they got such a crowd.

F: He didn't fit it to the crowd.

W: They had gone out and scraped up the whole West and got every live Republican body they could find, stacked them in there and he still made the same speech [with] about the same degree of vitality. I think he let them down pretty badly. That was my main criticism.

F: Where did you cover Johnson?

W: Mostly in the Midwest. I'm trying to remember now, but I remember one wild trip. Pat Furguson with the Baltimore Sun and I always joke about it. We left his main campaign plane; got into two or three old DC-3s and flew up to Mankato, Minnesota where he made a speech.

He and Hubert Humphrey made speeches there. And we got in the worst thunderstorm I ever remember flying through. It was just dreadful, just dreadful; I was sure it was the end of my days. I remember that trip in particular. I was also in Kansas City with Johnson, where he appeared with President Truman. I went down and spent one week-end on the Ranch during that time. It was not as famous then as it is now, of course. Up through the Midwest mostly.

F: Nothing out of the ordinary though?

W: No, except that I remember the great pleasure of that campaign was Johnson had an Electra, a chartered Electra; you may recall those planes. They had kind of a circular lounge right in the rear, the tail.

F: Right.

W: And after everything was through for the night, he'd be flying off somewhere--maybe Garden City, Kansas--be flying off to places like that; and Johnson would get back in that lounge with the half-dozen reporters that would be along. And in those days, you didn't stay out for vice presidential candidates very much.

F: Yes.

W: He would talk on as long as anybody would stay up and listen to him. And I remember one night--unfortunately I don't remember too many of the details, but I remember him talking at great length about how he had arranged the committee that ultimately worked out the censure of Joe McCarthy.

I've always thought that he was one of the most fascinating talkers in a small group I've ever met. Of course, he dominates the conversation totally. It's a monologue.

F: It's high class monologue.

W: It's high class monologue. It's superb mimicry. He's one of the great mimics. And that was the first time, in those little sessions, I became aware of what a really tremendous talker he was. It's way out of chronological order here, but it's one of the tragedies of his presidency that somehow he was never able, and his advisers were never able, to convey that magnetic quality he has.

F: I've often thought it was a shame he was ever given a script.

W: Yes. Quite true. And I can't believe that he could ever have gone off the cuff in such a way that would be damaging to the extent that it would have been a net loss for him, because he was so good at that kind of stuff.

F: I've often wondered if the format wouldn't have been better if he had had a half a dozen newsmen or advisors or whatever, and they just sat down and started discussing issues, after which he would have taken over and made the speech.

W: Yes.

F: Which is what he did with a small group.

W: Of course, he often did that with small groups once he got into the White House. The first year or two he was in office, I was part of those groups myself. I often was, because I was in the White House press corps.

F: No, but I'm talking about on television. If they'd used that as a TV format, then I thought it would have worked.

W: I see. It might have.

F: Let him forget the camera and just get to talking to Tom Wicker and five or six other people trying to persuade them, and let that great unseen audience just follow along in the wake, which I think would have come near doing.

W: Yes. I remember one other thing about that campaign that I've often pointed out to people, because I wrote the story, and I just think it's interesting to know, and that is that Johnson actually proposed what later became the Peace Corps, in a speech at the University of Nebraska, before Kennedy did. Hubert Humphrey claims it was all his idea, but insofar as that became a public proposal of the Democratic Party in 1960, Johnson made the first proposal.

F: Was this picked up by the newsmen at the time?

W: Oh, yes. I wrote a story. I've got the clippings, the lead in my piece. He didn't use the phrase Peace Corps, but that's clearly what he's talking about. And Kennedy came along with the same idea a couple of weeks later, and for some time there I thought that Kennedy had picked up the idea from Johnson. Although, I think the truth is they probably both picked it up from their research workers and so forth, and it just happened that Johnson came along with it first.

F: With your southern background of contacts, did you feel that Johnson really strengthened the ticket in the South?

W: Oh, I don't think there's any doubt of that. I was not on the famous--

F: Swing through Dixie train?

W: --campaign train that went down through the South. Our southern correspondents did that. But from everything I have heard from many southern political sources since, I just don't think there's any question that he strengthened the ticket. I think it's very much like the Liberal Party, you know, claims to have held New York for the Democrats that year. Well, you could make a statistical case that they did, but they couldn't have done it if there hadn't been a lot of other people voting, too. So I don't think you could say that [Johnson did it alone]; you can't prove that Johnson alone carried South Carolina for the Democratic Party that year. But I'd be willing to state categorically that they certainly would not have carried South Carolina had the party nominated almost anyone else for vice president, given the presidential candidate that they had.

F: In your tour around the country, was the religious issue as real as it seemed to be?

W: Yes, I think it was a real issue, but it's always been a question in my mind. I'm inclined to think that--I want to be careful in stating this--I've never been as clear that it hurt Kennedy as badly as people thought it would. Because, after all, Kennedy got benefit from it, too, as everyone knows, in the Catholic states.

F: It's a question of the balance there.

W: I've seen the case put both ways. Frankly, there's not been much doubt in my mind--I think I'm right on this although the people who

write with great knowledge about the Kennedys say I'm not--I think Kennedy used the Catholic issue; I think he used it deliberately. Of course, it was deliberately used against him. There's no question of that. In a state like Texas, most of the Midwestern states. I remember Robert Kennedy, who was the campaign manager, telling me that he thought that the Catholic issue hurt worse in the Midwest than it did in the southern states. Because, in the southern states, you had a Democratic party tradition that counterbalanced it to some extent. In the Midwest, you didn't necessarily have that, and the anti-Catholicism was among the people who didn't have anything to counterbalance this.

F: And were pivotal voters, in a sense.

W: That's right. But it was a major issue, and it had a lot to do with the way the campaign unfolded. And I think Kennedy was right to meet the issue head-on. I think, in a sense, he knew right along--I think maybe he learned this in West Virginia--that meeting that issue head-on was good politics and in a sense, it might end up profitable politics. So that when Norman Vincent Peale attacked Kennedy, I never was sure it hurt Kennedy at all. And a lot of people who might have been dubious about supporting a young man, about supporting a guy who had waffled on McCarthy, as it looked and as a lot of people thought, supporting Joe Kennedy's son, or if you had been a Johnson-Symington type Democrat--I think a lot of those people, ultimately, whatever else they thought, weren't going to be found voting against a Catholic.

F: Yes. Bent over backwards to be fair.

W: Right. And I think the attacks on Kennedy, as a Catholic--you know, nothing will bring the liberals around much faster than to have Norman Vincent Peale attack.

F: Right. Before we leave that campaign, did you get the feeling, either from your own knowledge of the situation or from talking with other newsmen, or from the candidate himself, that Johnson to a certain extent had tried to devise such a committee in Congress that would censure Joe McCarthy?

W: Oh, my recollection of that conversation on his airplane is quite clear. Not the details, as I say, but the meaning of it was--and it was in great detail with all sorts of sweeping Johnson phrases and mimicry; every senator was imitated and so forth--that he deliberately rigged a committee that he knew would put Joe McCarthy down; that was certainly the impression he was trying to create at that point. I've heard enough of the Johnson monologues to know that he might have told the same story two years later . . .

F: Yes. Different set of characters.

W: . . . for an entirely different purpose, but that was the story he was telling that night I was listening. And I'm inclined to think that was the right one because it jived with so much else that Johnson did. I've always thought that whether he was --

F: It was actually an extremely conservative committee that was, in some ways, puritanical.

W: Exactly. What other kind of committee could deal with McCarthy? If

you put a whole bunch of people like Joe Clark in there, it wouldn't have any weight.

F: But Arthur Watkins was almost as unassailable as church.

W. Exactly my point. And I believe that the political student will find that Lyndon Johnson, whatever else he was, great legislator they say, great politician, I can't doubt the latter, whatever else he was, I think he was the master ticket balancer of all time. You look at the various committees and commissions and things that he appointed. The Warren Commission is a classic example.

F: Yes.

W: He was the best base-toucher that I've ever seen, and it's instructive. I made a point of this in my book about Johnson. It's instructive to go and study the guest list in his personal box the day he went down and made his first address to Congress. It just shows you the master at work there. Because he was the inheritor of a totally shattered party, and he managed to get every single solitary element of it in his guest box up there, and still had it look like a guest list. He even had Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

F: He probably wondered what he was doing there, but he was there.

Did you see much of him during the vice presidential years?

W: No.

F: Was he as much a forgotten man as he was supposed to be, or was he just being a quiet man?

W: Well, it's hard to say. It's hard to say because I guess not many of us paid that much attention to him. I remember going down and

interviewing him several times at his office in the Capitol. I don't think he ever had an office up in the. . . .

F: No. He was always in the EOB area.

W: Yes. And they were always very fruitless interviews, both during the 1960 campaign and throughout the time he was vice president.

F: Was he just kind of a rubber stamp, in a sense?

W: Exactly.

F: "I'm for the administration."

W: I never heard him, not one single time, ever put a bad word on President Kennedy. Never. That's not to say he didn't do it, but he certainly never did it to me.

By then, you understand, I'm working for the New York Times.

F: Right.

W: I had become a White House correspondent in 1961. And I saw Johnson several times. I remember seeing him once out at Andrews Air Force Base. I'm trying to remember what dignitaries were coming in.

F: Maybe he was coming or going.

W: Anyway, it was a group of foreign dignitaries of the level that the vice president would meet rather than the president. I remember his pulling me over and recalling me to Mrs. Johnson, and we chatted a little bit, very friendly conversation. I don't remember, at all when it was. He was vice president.

I remember having a conversation with Bill Moyers once, on a sidewalk outside the Peace Corps headquarters on Connecticut Avenue. And

he told me that he thought that Johnson was just withering up and dying as vice president. I remember that. Then after the camel driver incident, I guess it was, I went down to see him, routinely. I just tried to do that ever so often. It seemed to me to make sense when he was vice president. And I always kept hoping he would leak something, but he never did.

F: Stay in touch.

W: I'm trying to recall what these circumstances were. Liz Carpenter was working for him then. And he began to tell me, in typically overwhelming Johnson fashion, what a good thing the camel driver incident had been, what good publicity for everybody, and good American-Pakistan relations.

F: I judge it nearly unhinged some of the State Department.

W: Yes, I think so. But he just sort of overwhelmed me with the stuff, you know; he gave me some very self-serving photographs, and said that he thought they'd be great if they could appear in the New York Times. I remember after I went out of the office, I said to Liz Carpenter, "Liz, now come on. You know I can't get these pictures in the New York Times." She said, "Oh, I know that. Don't worry about it. Just take them and go on and forget it." So I took the pictures and went on.

That night at home a big black limousine drove up in front of my house, and a uniformed chauffeur came to the door. He had a big package from the office of the vice president; it was another big package of clippings and things about Bashir Ahmad, the camel driver. And so

to me, that suggested just how much Johnson really did wish to be in the thick of things, and would try to get into the thick of things.

And yet, with all of that, I don't know of an incident--certainly never happened to me, and I don't know of any newspapermen who would say it did--where he took the easy route of trying to backbite Kennedy, or leaking a lot of information, or making unauthorized speeches, or going off in the Agnew route. He just never did that. The fact is, I think the only notable speech that Johnson made as vice president--well, of course, there was the trip to Berlin, but that was obviously a presidential assignment--was one that I believe George [Reedy] wrote for him on civil rights. He made [it] at Gettysburg on the Fourth of July, just before he became president.

F: Yes.

W: He just didn't do any of the Agnew stuff at all. I guess he made speeches, but none of them made any headlines.

F: He filled in secondary places at various [functions].

W: And he did all those fraudulent things that vice presidents do. I used that term advisedly. I mean like presiding over the Space Council; oh, they had something about government contracts, civil rights. I think when I use the term "fraudulent," I don't mean those aren't useful things to do. But I mean they're things that any high level civil servant could do, and it doesn't make the vice president . . .

F: Kind of like the old WPA jobs, in a way.

W: Yes, exactly so.

F: Find something for him to keep busy.

W: I think Johnson was a good deal better informed, though, as vice president, than any vice president taking office after the death of a president had ever been before. And I think this came about after Harry Truman's bad experience with that, because it had just been more institutionalized for the [vice] president to be kept informed.

F: Conversely, did you ever hear Kennedy, either on the record or off the record, denigrate his vice president?

W: I never heard Kennedy do it. I remember Scotty Reston telling what I thought was a good crack by Kennedy, which suggests a certain--I remember Scotty called on President Kennedy at Hyannis Port, went up to see him specifically when he was the bureau chief and I was the White House correspondent. So after he'd seen Kennedy, he and I went out for a drink somewhere, and Scotty was giving me an account of what had been said. And among other things, he said that Kennedy told him that he was composing a telegram to send to Vice President Johnson for his birthday; he said it was like trying to write a state document, the phrasing. Johnson was touchy about it. We were always getting that kind of thing, but I never heard Johnson put down.

I remember I had lunch with Pierre Salinger once; I frequently did and we fell to talking about 1964, the prospects there. And Pierre said, around one of those big cigars, he said, "Well, there's one thing for sure." He said, "One Democrat who's really given up any ambition to be president is Lyndon B. Johnson." And I said, "Are

you out of your mind?" At which point, he just broke up laughing, which was a kind of a--I don't know whether that sounds like it but it was apparent to me at the time--mockery of Vice President Johnson, who, of course, at that time really did appear to be out of it, as everybody knows.

I should go on to say that I never put any stock whatever in the reports that Kennedy was going to take Johnson off the ticket in 1964. I never believed that. It was not only Kennedy's quite unequivocal answers at news conferences, which you know about. There was not only not any indication of it, but, to me, one of the products of that institutionalization of things, where they tried to bring the vice president in and give him jobs and assignments, I think that made it very hard to drop vice presidents.

F: You were almost stuck with him.

W: You're almost stuck with him. In the first place, the question could be raised very easily: "What did you pick him for in the first place, if you don't want him again?"

F: Right.

W: And I felt that Kennedy still had his same problem with the South, worse than ever probably, so I never bought the idea that he was dumping [Johnson].

F: Where were you on that tragic November day when the assassination took place?

W: I was in the second press bus in the motorcade.

F: Well, what happened to you, specifically? Had you been with the tour

from San Antonio to Houston and Fort Worth to Dallas?

W: I'd been on the whole thing.

F: Did it seem to be going as well as is generally reported to be?

W: Yes, it did. We were all aware, however, of pulling and hauling back and forth between the [Governor John B.] Connally managers and [Senator Ralph] Yarborough. It was reported to us, and I cannot remember the source, the literal source--I wrote at the time something like "informed sources" and now I can't remember. But I recently had an exchange of letters with Senator Yarborough. I think maybe the story which I wrote then had been reprinted somewhere, and he came across it years later. Anyway, I wrote, as a number of others did, on the basis of informed sources that Kennedy had passed the word that on the second day, that is the day that he was killed, that he wanted Johnson and Yarborough to ride in the same car or else. Therefore, they did ride in the same car, and that was the reason why. Now, Senator Yarborough, I think--I'll have to look up the letter, but my recollection is he contended later that it was not true that they had been ordered, so to speak, to ride together. But it was widely believed, and everybody was watching for that sort of thing.

F: Was it generally believed that Kennedy was there, in great part, to heal or at least to subdue the breach between Connally and Yarborough, or that he had really gone down because Texas was a fairly narrow state, and it was time to go down there and do a little politicking?

W: I think both reasons, both reasons. And I remember sitting in the coffee shop of the hotel in Fort Worth. What is it, the . . . ?

F: Texas.

W: The Texas Hotel in Fort Worth. I remember sitting there with John Connally and somebody from his staff, and Doug Kiker, who was then at the Herald Tribune, and Bo Byers, I believe it was. Connally, who was then governor, was doing his damnedest to get out of Byers--I'm not certain it was Byers but I think I'm right. The Houston Post?

F: I think Byers was with the Chronicle then. I'm not sure.

W: Anyway, it was one of the Houston reporters.

F: Probably either Byers or Bill Gardner.

W: His paper was going to run the next day, the following afternoon, a poll that it had taken, a state poll of some kind, and it was going to show Goldwater far ahead of Kennedy. Well, Connally was trying to find out what that poll was going to show, and Byers wouldn't tell him. It got to be a kind of, apparently, a point of ethics. He wasn't going to tell the Governor before it came out in the paper. I knew what it was going to show, because Byers had told us somewhere back down along the line, you know, just gossip among the reporters. Kiker joined, sat down at the table, and the first thing he said to Governor Connally was, "What do you think about this poll that shows Goldwater beating the hell out of Kennedy?" Byers threw up his hands then. So that was the climate that we were in.

F: Incidentally, did Connally argue with the findings, or did he tend to accept them, or did that close the topic?

W: No, I think his point was that it was true, that if they had an election that day that Kennedy would be very far behind, that he might lose anyway, but it wasn't lost for sure, and they would do certain things and so forth to make him carry the state. And in fact, I think the Governor had a joint news conference with Kennedy the next morning. It seems to me he said something about that.

F: Yes. Okay, so you're in Dallas. The sun is shining. It's a little cold, but things seemed warm and friendly enough. And what happens to you on that second bus?

W: I remember--I'll have to go and look the name up now, but I've written this down somewhere, it's been published--one of the reporters on our bus was sitting beside me, and he got up in front. His family owned some weekly newspapers down in Texas. [The reference is to James Mathis, then of the Advance--Newhouse--Syndicate.] He got up and went to the front of the bus, and he looked out the window. He said, "Something's happened. The President's car just sped away, just gunned away." But we didn't think too much about it, because I thought maybe we'd come right on through the town, obviously, you know, out of the motorcade area.

F: You just about had. Another hundred yards and you'd had it made.

W: We went past the Book Depository, and so forth there; the first thing I noticed that made me really aware that something was wrong was when we came out of the other side of the underpass.

F: You go through a triple underpass there.

W: Right. I saw a motorcycle cop, with one of those sidecars, drive his motorcycle up the embankment, as if he were trying to get up on top and see what was going on. That was the first thing that made me aware of anything being wrong. And our bus went on to the Trade Mart, and we all got off.

F: Still not aware that really anything has happened.

W: No. We went walking through the Trade Mart which is a big, long thing, as you know,and the press place was going to be upstairs, up two or three flights. Again, I wrote this somewhere--it was the only time I've ever seen a rumor, because you could see that rumor moving across a room, people's heads turning and so forth. We didn't know what but we knew something was wrong. It's a very interesting fact about modern communications, but there we were in Dallas. We got up to the press quarters, up on the balcony up there.

F: All the top newsmen in the country, and they don't know there's a story that's just erupted.

W: Well, this was only one bus. The other bus had done something else, I don't know what. And Marianne Means, of the Hearst newspapers, was on the phone to her office in New York, just letting them know something had happened. They said, "Well, by God, we know something's happened. He's been shot!" They'd heard it on the radio. "He's at Parkland Hospital." So all the press went running back out.

I remember running down an up escalator, because it was the quickest way to get down, down an up escalator. I managed to

get back on our bus, along with some of the reporters, and the bus took us straightaway to Parkland Hospital. We encountered outside Senator Yarborough, who gave us a very detailed account of his participation, which, of course, was the Vice President's, the same thing, hearing the shots and all that. I didn't see the Vice President, the President, that day. The only part that I really personally saw was when they brought President Kennedy's coffin out of the hospital, and Mrs. Kennedy walking beside it with her blood-stained clothing, and members of the White House staff in a state of shock. But by then, the new President had been taken on out to the airport. Wandering around there, I missed seeing that, and I don't know anybody who saw him leave.

F: Were things halfway orderly insofar as periodic reports? I know we got Malcolm Kilduff's role all laid out and so forth.

W: No, they weren't orderly at all. My recollection of events is when we got there, those of us who could crowded around and heard Senator Yarborough. Then Wayne Hawks, who was one of the White House permanent staff--

F: Now, Parkland isn't set up to handle a whole corps of newsmen calling in. What did you do?

W: It sure isn't. Wayne Hawks came out, and Hawks plays a peculiar role in this. He was the White House documents man, I think it was. But he went along on all the trips, and back in those days, he was virtually one of the press staff, working with the press. So we all knew him and trusted him. Hawks came out and said that he just couldn't tell

us anything; he didn't know anything, but they were trying to work things out as best they could, and they had commandeered a nurses' classroom around the side of the hospital for a press room, and if everybody would go around there, they would get information to us as quickly as they could. So most of us went drifting off that way. Although I got up close enough, before the Secret Service drove me off, to get a pretty good look at the limousine, and the bloodstained interior.

Then I went walking off around in the direction Hawks indicated, and there was a car standing there with the doors open. A convertible with the doors wide open, I remember that, and the radio on. It turned out later it was the car that Johnson and Yarborough had been riding in. The car radio was on, and somebody was announcing on the radio, "The President of the United States is dead." No source of any kind, just said that. I remember running on and telling that to Hugh Sidey. I believed it, even though there was no source for it. Sidey hung back a little bit, Hugh Sidey of Time magazine, and before long, he encountered the priest coming out who had delivered the last rites. So, by the time I got to the press room, and he got to the press room with our reports, everybody pretty well believed the President was dead. I'm trying to remember the sequence of things. Kilduff came in and announced that the President was dead. Everybody went bowling out trying to find telephones, all through the

hospital. I got through to my office; I told them that I didn't have anything to give them then, but what I proposed to do was ultimately to sit down and dictate a narrative of everything I knew, and to stay on the presidential part of it, and that there wasn't much I could do about the police story or the apprehension of whoever did it, if there was any such story. And they said, fine, they'd worry about that from the wires, and for me to stick with the presidential aspect of it. So I kept on wandering through the hospital. At that point, that's where I came out and saw President Kennedy's body being taken out, and Mrs. Kennedy going along. President and Mrs. Johnson, as I found out later, had already been taken to the airport, I went back to that press room, and they brought in Dr. . . .

F: I don't remember [his name] either.

W: They brought him in, and he gave us a description of the wounds. That's one of the controversial things about President Kennedy's death. He described the throat wound to be an entry wound. It was in my story, among other things. Later he retracted on that, but nobody--lot of people don't believe it. It's one reason why they think there was a conspiracy.

F: Yes.

W: The doctor gave quite a detailed account of the wounds, and what had happened and so forth. Hawks came in again and said that the new President was going to be sworn in at Love Field; anybody that wanted to go should go outside right then and get aboard one of those

press buses. I don't know why, but I assumed that the ceremony would take place in the terminal somewhere. What made me think that, I don't know. Anyhow, I got aboard the press bus, and I was writing by then. I got in a back seat, you know, the wide seat in the back, put my typewriter down and went to work. We rode out and we entered the airport by some back gate. We drove across runways out there. But finally, we stopped, and just as we got there, Air Force One was roaring down the runway and took off. Most of the White House press was in the bus.

We found out that the only reporters that--I'm pretty sure I'm right on this--had been aboard for the ceremony, the swearing in, were Chuck Roberts of Newsweek and Merriman Smith of UPI and Sid Davis of Westinghouse radio stations. Davis had to broadcast right away. So he got off the plane, and he was off as we arrived. He got on the back of somebody's car out there and gave us all a detailed briefing on the swearing in ceremony, which included the wrong oath. You know the wrong oath story?

F: No.

W: You ought to talk to Sid Davis about this if you can. Davis read out to us on a three-by-five card what purported to be the oath that Johnson had taken. I took it down, just word for word, as he read it. And I reported it in the New York Times. Eddie Folliard's story in the Washington Post had the same thing, but it's not the right oath.

F: You mean, it was not the one he took.

W: It was pretty close, but it was not the right oath, and as the tape

that Kilduff had taken later proved, it was not the oath that Johnson took, but it's the oath that the New York Times says forever that Johnson took. So I was puzzled by this, and sometime in the following year, I wrote Judge Hughes and asked her what had happened, because Davis said that she had given him this card with the oath that she had read on it. And she wrote me back a very noncommittal letter and said that she just didn't care to comment on it, and didn't. So my surmise is that she had just hastily, as best she could, put together an oath that was pretty near the real thing, and by the time she got in the plane, Johnson had got the real oath from Bobby Kennedy, and that by mistake, she gave Davis her false oath. Anyway, I remember that part of it.

F: She also gave her Bible away.

W: Yes, that's right.

F: Which she regrets.

W: Well, Doug Kiker and I then went racing through the back lots of that airport, and through a warehouse and finally got over to the terminal. There's a kind of balcony above the terminal and I wrote my story there and ran it down to the phones and dictated it.

F: Did a crowd congregate at the terminal?

W: Not that I noticed.

F: The curious? They just went on with their regular airport business?

W: That's right. Well, I wouldn't want to say that, but what I mean is there wasn't a big crowd standing around. Nobody set up a special TV or anything like that. Kiker found one of those

private clubs around there.

F: Everybody get out to the airport at one time, or anything like that?

W: No, not that I was aware of at all.

Later on, when I got through with my story and went downtown, went down to the Dallas News--they had our wire service and were sort of headquarters for us--the town didn't even [look excited]; you know, it looked kind of like Sunday afternoon in a way, but there certainly wasn't any great excitement.

F: How long did you hang around Dallas?

W: I stayed until Saturday afternoon, the following Saturday. That is, this happened on Friday, I stayed and came back on Saturday afternoon.

F: Regular commercial plane?

W: Yes. And I had to pull some wires to get it. I had my office pull some wires so I could get out of there and get back because they wanted me to come back and cover the funeral stuff, which I did. I walked to the Capitol on Sunday behind the coffin--a mob of reporters were walking along--and covered the funeral story on Monday. I was in the cathedral.

F: No variance from the generally accepted story of how everything went, Saturday, Sunday, Monday?

W: No, not that I know. I was in the ceremonial end of it all through that time, and, so far as I know, everything went, as you say, as the generally accepted course of events. I do have, now, an account, and this, too, is in my book, but it wasn't published at the time, wasn't written about at the time. I do have a

pretty good account from someone who had it--well, we're in a historical document here, so I don't have to [omit sources]. I have a good account from Bill Moyers who claimed to have it from President Johnson directly of how on Sunday night after he'd been sworn in on Friday, he met with all the foreign policy advisors and Henry Cabot Lodge, who, as you may recall, had been scheduled to meet on Sunday with Kennedy. Johnson was put under--I won't say heavy pressure from Lodge--but was told in no uncertain terms by Lodge that the situation in Vietnam was deteriorating rapidly; that something was going to have to be done to save Vietnam, if we were going to save it, and it would be up to Johnson to take those decisions. As I was able to reconstruct it, and I talked to several people who participated in that session later, Johnson's reply was, "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the president who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went." That's a quote, at least, that's a reconstructed quote. Then Lodge is supposed to have said, "What kind of political support will you have?" It's the natural thing for an old senator to say. Incidentally, they were close friends, Lodge and Johnson. And Johnson said, again, according to my reconstruction, "I don't think Congress wants us to let the communists take over South Vietnam." Unquote. And to me, that means--and I believe that that story's true, or I wouldn't have written it in my book--that within forty-eight hours after he'd taken office, Johnson made the basic political decision that shaped the course of this whole--

F: It was the keystone, really.

W: Right. And as far as I know, my book is the only place where that's appeared. Now it was factually reported in the New York Times and other newspapers that that meeting took place. So far as I know, this is the only account of what happened in the meeting at that time. And after I heard that account from Moyers, I checked it with several others that I knew had been in the meeting from the list in the New York Times that day. And while memories vary, generally speaking, this that I've just read you in my book is what I believe to have happened at that time. [JFK and LBJ: The Influence of Personality Upon Politics, Wm. Morrow & Company]

F: When did you see Johnson?

W: First?

F: Yes.

W: I saw Johnson on--I'll have to look you up the precise date, and I'll have a memo on it. But almost immediately I asked Pierre Salinger who was staying on as press secretary for an interview with Johnson. And it was either Friday one week after Kennedy was shot or Friday two weeks, and I can tell you precisely when I dig out the memo to this. Incidentally, I have a number of memos on conversations of this kind I'd be glad to provide you with xeroxes of.

F: Love to have them.

W: Maybe I should provide you with the original and keep the xerox myself.

F: Either way.

W: But Pierre called up late in an afternoon--oh, it must have been pretty near six o'clock--and said, "Rush right on over. He'll see you now."

And I went tearing through. Of course, it was mid-winter, around the first of December; it was dark. And I went over there, and indeed was shown right in. It was an experience that I'm not likely to forget. Of course, by then, the man was president.

F: Yes.

W: I knew he'd already made the speech to Congress which had been so impressive to everybody.

F: He'd moved into the Oval Room?

W: Oh, he was in the Oval Room, this was in the Oval Room, yes, which is why it was probably two weeks after Kennedy was killed.

I don't think he'd seen many newspapermen by then. Probably Bill White, I'm sure, but I think I was one of the early ones. And I should say, just in a personal sense, that I was very anxious at that point for President Johnson to succeed. It was quite a chauvinistic point of view on my part, because I was southern and he was southern, and I felt it very strongly. And I admired him, anyway.

Anyway, I went in and, in that kind of a mood, I said something, kind of a dumb thing that people say like, "Mr. President, I think we're all very fortunate that after a terrible thing like this, we have someone who can take over so capably." He was having his hair cut. He was sitting out in the middle of the floor of the Oval Office in a portable chair somebody had brought in, with a regular barber's sheet on him, and some barber was cutting his hair. And as men will when they're having their hair cut, he had his head kind of down, his chin on his chest; he was looking up at me, you know, with his eyes cut upward.

F: With the top of his eyes.

W: Yes. And I came in and said that. He didn't say a word. I was standing up, and he still didn't say anything. He just kept looking at me and looking at me. And I stood there, and I started shuffling from one foot to another, and I didn't know whether, at that point, I'd written something that had angered him, or what. I just didn't know. But he stared at me a long time. And I became decidedly uncomfortable. And he didn't say anything at all. It was really rather terrifying. You know, nobody confronts the president very often, and I had not been in Washington all that long. It was only 1963. Didn't know Johnson all that well. And he rather beat me down there with his eyes.

I have since decided--I may be entirely wrong, but just trying to make a judgment on this--that that was a tactic, in a way, [now] that he had become president. I don't know if he did that to anybody else, or used other tactics. He had become president. He was sitting there, a different quality of man by then, the relationship was bound to be different, not that I had been all that close a friend anyway. I think he wanted to establish something, and I rather think that's a brutal way to do it. But he established it all right.

That was an interesting session. He told me a lot of things that had not been published. But by the time I got out of the interview which lasted at least an hour, I would say, I thought that--and that was on a Friday night--rather than rushing back and getting all this nice information in, for instance, the fact that he was going to go to

make a speech at the United Nations, that was one thing that hadn't appeared before and a couple of other items of that quality--rather than doing that for the late editions of the Saturday morning paper, which is really about as obscure as you can get in the New York Times, that I would hold on.

It was an exclusive interview, and I'd write my story on Saturday for the Sunday paper.

So I went over to the White House, routinely, on Saturday morning. At that particular period during that transition, I was working seven days a week. So was he. It was very important, and I recognized that that two or three or four week period would never be duplicated. So I was just working steadily, I told my wife I was going to do it, and she expected it. I went over there routinely Saturday morning, I wandered in, and the press lobby was quite empty. And Chris. . .What was her name? I've forgotten. Anyway, she was Pierre's private secretary. She rushed out and grabbed me by the arm and said, "Hurry! Hurry! Hurry, they're all in there." So I went tearing through the hallway, in the other door of the Oval Office just in time. Johnson was just starting to hold his first press conference. This was ironic because the night before, in my private interview, he had said to me, I remember the phrase very well, "What would you do about your news conference?" And I said, "Well, Mr. President, of course, you have to make your own decisions how you are the most comfortable.

There are no rules. You are entitled to do it any way you want to do it." "But," I said, "I've always thought, and I thought during the Kennedy Administration, that it would be very advantageous sometime if you could just have those of us who cover the White House to come into your office ever so often, so that we could just talk that way. And then you can do the televised news conferences when you want to." He said that he had gotten the same advice from--let's see, the elderly gentleman's name with Washington Star.

F: Gould Lincoln?

W: No. McKelway. Ben McKelway. And I said, "Well, you know, I think it's very good advice." And I came in the next morning to find that he was acting on it. What he'd decided to do was just to do it suddenly and call in the reporters who happened to be in the press lobby to give them time. As it happened, that Saturday morning he'd gotten mostly second stringers. I don't mean in terms of quality, but I mean they were not the regular White House correspondents.

F: The type that would be out on Saturday.

W: That's right. And every single item of interest that he had given me exclusively the night before, he put on the record at the news conference. So I was shot, which taught me something about holding stories over.

F: Yes. Go ahead and make that late edition, get the credit.

Did you see him much then? Did you ever see him again privately?

W: Oh, yes. Several times. And again, I'd have to go to all my notes which I've saved. But the first year he was in office,

before the Goldwater election, he was not difficult to see at all. In fact, quite the opposite. Even in 1965, he was not terribly hard to see on a private basis.

F: Did he try to give you something when you saw him on those occasions? Or did you have the feeling you were getting the runaround?

W: Well, it depended. Let me describe two occasions, for instance, just in brief. Sometime along about I would guess February or March of 1964, he'd been in office two or three months, Andy Hatcher was conducting the press briefing.

And I had been getting upset because the President had not been holding many news conferences after, I thought, a good start. He held one at Christmas down at the Ranch on a bale of hay.

I saw Bill Moyers who at that time was the number one White House man, as we thought, well, no, except for Walter Jenkins, who later left the staff. Walter Jenkins was the number one man, but other than that, Bill was. I saw Bill standing at the door listening to this briefing, so I decided to seize the moment. I attacked Andy Hatcher very strongly because the President wasn't holding any news conferences. "Why isn't the President doing this?" I said. "He promised, and he's not keeping up his pledges," and this, that, and so forth. I really hit him pretty hard on it because Moyers was standing there, and I wanted Moyers to hear. Well, lo and behold, within the hour,

within the hour, Moyers reached me at my little cubbyhole there in the White House press room and asked me to come back and talk to him. So I went back to talk to him and that lasted ten seconds. Then we went to see the President and Moyers left, which is unique in my experience.

On that occasion, I don't remember right at this moment what we talked about, but I was totally unprepared to interview the President. I hadn't even been thinking about doing any such thing, and it seems to me that what I got then was a long review of all the things that he had been doing in the two or three months and so forth. And I think quite useful.

And another time, not too long after, again in 1964, I was assigned by the New York Times magazine to write a piece about the Johnson staff, the White House staff, and how it differed from the Kennedy staff. By then it had pretty well taken shape. Sorensen had left and so forth. How they differed. So I questioned a number of people on the staff. And finally, I spoke to Jack Valenti and told him what I wanted. "Oh, I don't know about that. The President is very sensitive about these things. Maybe I'll have to talk to him about this."

I said, "Jack, I'm going to write the piece and if you don't want to talk about it, fine, but if you do, why, it would be very helpful." And he said, "Well, let me think about it, and I'll let you know."

Later that day, he called me back, and he said, "I'm going to fix you up. I'm going to get you in to see the man."

By then I knew, although I didn't say so to Jack, that was the last thing I wanted. That was exactly the wrong kind of thing to go to President Johnson with.

F: Right.

W: But, nonetheless, I went through with it. I went on in to see President Johnson. Obviously, I had to do that. And sure enough, he filled me full of the biggest pile of nonsense about how his staff operated. He told me exactly what he wanted me to think, you see. This was always one of President Johnson's failings. He thought that he could tell you something and legitimize it from his official station. Well, even the worst reporter could come to the White House twice a week and observe the way that place functioned and know that Jack Valenti was not an assistant press secretary, which is what he tried to tell me that he was. Valenti, at that time, was doing a great many very important things. But President Johnson never quite realized, somehow, that he couldn't make things so, that weren't so. I'm talking about in this relatively harmless matter.

But there I was with a dilemma. Because the President told me all these things about his staff which were patently not true, and I had to make some kind of sense out of them. What I ultimately did, I just put a long section in my article about President Johnson thinks that his staff operates this way, but even sometimes the boss doesn't know. I finessed through it some way.

On the other hand, I remember again in 1964, after the famous announcement that he would not consider anybody from the Cabinet

for vice president, which threw Bobby Kennedy over the side, he had a unique thing the next day. He had a backgrounder for the press which meant that it couldn't be attributed to him. He went all through why he had done this. It was pretty good stuff. I had an appointment for lunch that day with George Reedy. I got to the Sans Souci Restaurant, and I waited for Reedy and the phone rang. And he said, "I told the President that I was having lunch with you, and he said to bring you and Doug along and have lunch with him." And I said, "Well, fine, but what's this about Doug?" He said, "Well, I thought that I was having lunch with you and Doug Kiker."

F: Who?

W: Doug Kiker. He and I were friends from the Herald Tribune. And I said, "No, you've got it mistaken, George. It was just with me." "Oh, God!" he said, "The President is expecting Kiker. I'll have to get hold of him somehow." So he did get hold of Kiker. In the meantime the President himself had brought in Eddie Folliard so Folliard and Kiker and I had lunch with President Johnson and Reedy.

F: Upstairs?

W: In the little upstairs dining room, you know.

F: Yes.

W: And this is the luncheon memorialized in Teddy White's book The Making of the President 1964 about the selection of the vice president.

F: Yes.

W: And the account in there is essentially accurate because it is taken from a long memo that Kiker and Folliard and I prepared later on that afternoon, after we got out of this. I don't know who gave the memo to White. I have no idea. I didn't. Except that those things, as the world's come to know, anything can be xeroxed nowadays.

F: Right.

W: And I was quite free and showed the thing around to my own colleagues, because it was useful information. In fact at Atlantic City in 1964, after the announcement of the choice of Hubert Humphrey, we put together a very long story. It ran about two New York Times pages, which I wrote. I didn't do all the reporting, but I did all the writing. I had that memo with me and I pulled it out and I put all the essentials of it into this. So it saw the light of day in several ways. I didn't write anything about the luncheon.

F: Yes.

W: I just wrote the substantive facts. But that was most informative, very informative indeed, and about as frank as I ever heard President Johnson on politics.

F: Did you not swallow, then, that sort of last minute play of flirting with Gene McCarthy, flirting with Tom Dodd, et cetera, et cetera?

W: Well, yes, because--well, I don't know whether I swallowed it, but for other reasons. Because, you see, after this long luncheon, he had not at that point anointed Hubert Humphrey, and he was going through all the possibilities, everybody he could think of, saying why this one would be good and that one would be good. I had a very strong

impression, emerging from that luncheon that he was not going to take Humphrey. Doug Kiker thought that he was going to take Humphrey.

F: Was that rather typical?

W: What our memo told us later was some of the considerations that had apparently gone into that decision--not to pick McNamara, for instance, and all that. One of the interesting things in there was, he predicted, he said then that McCarthy was strong in the South.

F: Yes.

W: I've always thought that McCarthy would have been strong in the South, in 1968.

F: Yes. Was that tendency of his to throw things out in such a way that you and some other seasoned person could come up with opposite interpretations, do you think it was a purposed obscuring, or do you think it was just like reading the Bible? And I don't have to tell somebody from Hamlet, North Carolina, that there are several interpretations!

W: (Laughter) I don't know that it was a technique on his part. It may have been. I never would have thought of that. In that particular case, he was being very careful, as it appeared to me. I mean, he was insisting that he hadn't made up his mind.

F: He was just running a check-off list.

W: He was running a check-off list down the line, and I just got the impression somehow that, as indeed I think events in the White House years later bore out, that he wasn't all that high on Humphrey. Kiker got the impression that, weighing everything, he thought that Humphrey was his best choice. And those two impressions aren't mutually

exclusive, necessarily.

F: Yes.

W: I just got the one and Kiker, the other. I have the feeling, looking back on it, he didn't want us to know what his choice would be, granted. I think it's entirely possible, looking back on it, I think it's probably true that by then he had settled on Humphrey and that most all of that was a charade, down towards the end, to keep up the excitement, just as his coming to the convention and nominating Humphrey was a device to rescue the thing from sheer boredom. Johnson is, I think, capable of all that [inaudible] showmanship.

I don't really even object to that very much. Because I think you can legitimately say that even though he might have as early as March decided that he was going to pick Humphrey, right up to the minute that he uttered the words at the convention, he still could have changed his mind.

F: Yes.

W: And so it isn't done, but it's done, in other words.

F: Right. Plus the fact that you do want to rescue a convention.

W: Sure.

F: One that's cut and dried.

W: Exactly.

F: Almost might as well not be held.

W: That's exactly right.

F: Did you feel--this is two-bit psychology, not worth any more than that--when Johnson gave you answers that did mislead

that he was aware that he was misleading? Or do you think that he tends to get wrapped up in selling a package, and like a good salesman, or a good PR man, or something, he sometimes is so busy selling the product that he doesn't pay much attention to the fact? He mesmerizes himself at the time?

W: I think that's partly it. That's quite right. And I think that tendency was disastrous in the situation in Vietnam later on, where he became so intent on selling the package, as you put it, and could rationalize to himself that selling the package was in the national interest. You know, as long as he believed the war was justified, then it became vitally important to make other people believe the war was justified, and perhaps if it was all that justified, then any step was--you know, all's fair in love and war. I think that's a fairly sound way to look at it: that Johnson was a tremendous salesman.

Old Senator Harry Byrd, the older senator, told me once that Johnson was the only man he had never been able to win an argument from. And I think that's right. Johnson is a hard man to win an argument from. I think there was that, and I think--and it was true even when he was a senator--there was always a tendency in dealing with the press that he never quite understood that the press was not necessarily going to simply accept what he said as Holy Writ; that reporters might go behind it, that if he said, "I've got forty votes lined up," they might go out and make their own head count and find that he only had twenty. He had that tendency,

and I think that there were certain things in the recent broadcast that made me think it's still there: the feeling that somehow an official statement has some claim on truth aside from the facts.

F: That makes it so.

W: Right. And I think that's subtly but significantly different, somehow, from just simply out-and-out lying to cover up facts of some kind. I wouldn't want to make that case morally perhaps, but politically, I think it's different. I never felt that Johnson was just, as a lot of political figures I've known have been, a guy who at all times and in every way served his own selfish interests. Told you anything that served his own selfish interests. I never thought that. I think a lot of this is wrapped up in Johnson's personality, much more so than in some narrow, venal sort of way. I think that what you say is essentially accurate. He was a salesman, and almost any excess in salesmanship seemed justified if he could just make the sale.

F: When you would get an exclusive or near-exclusive--

W: Let me go on and say that there isn't much in American life that would tend to tell you that that's wrong. Because, after all, that's the way we sell automobiles in this country.

F: Right.

W: And then, you can make a case that the whole country is built on selling automobiles. And then, if you believe that, as the President probably did--

F: Not much question that he'd have sold more automobiles than almost any other person!

W: That's right. And then again, it's fairly easy to think that that's the same way that you sell policy decisions.

F: Right. Along that line, did you get the feeling that, in a sense, he tried to write your stories, rather than laying it out and letting it come out as Tom Wicker saw it, and "X" correspondent saw it, and so on?

W: Well, I don't think so. Not much more so than any president does. I mean, every president has an eye to the way things will look. Every president in modern times has employed public relations techniques and so forth. I think President Johnson did that, yes, but I wouldn't say that was a great fault.

F: Don't you have a sort of a . . . .

W: He checked up on stories about as closely as any president ever did.

I had an amusing story. Once, in the 1964 campaign, he campaigned in San Francisco and I went out there with him. He had an enormous crowd; I've forgotten what it was. But I'm always bearish on crowd sizes, just habit. The San Francisco police chief reported it a half million crowd, so I reported it was 350,000. And I was probably generous at that. You know, these crowds are usually about half what people say they are. And that was in summertime, which was before the convention.

Six months or more later, after the defeat of Goldwater, about

the time of the inauguration, he had a group of reporters one night at the White House to talk, a routine backgrounder. And in the course of that, he got into one of those monologues, reviewing everything he had done since November 22 in Dallas. He went all through the campaign and said, "And then we went out to San Francisco, and we had a crowd of half million people out there." Flicked his finger over to me and said, "The New York Times said it was 350,000. But it was 500,000 people!"

F: You got the feeling that--

W: He did that six or eight months later.

F: --he never forgot anything.

W: No. Never forgot anything. He loved those crowds and that 1964 campaign. We went down to Georgia and spoke at Gainesville where that terrible hurricane was. There was a tremendous crowd. Johnson pulled me and some other reporter I can't remember, he pulled us up on the platform before the speech right where he was going to speak from, pointed out over the multitude there and said, "Now isn't that a great crowd? By golly, that's a real crowd." Just bubbling over, enthusiastic about that crowd. This was obviously the result of the fact that so many people were writing that he didn't turn people on the way Kennedy did.

F: Yes. Do you think he labored under that the whole time, that feeling that he was on the outside looking in?

W: Oh, yes. I think very much so. And I think that came to influence his conduct in the White House.

F: Kind of like the new rich who never had been accepted in the country club.

W: Exactly so. I think he was very sensitive to that, particularly when he kept most of Kennedy's main advisors around as long as he could, Rusk and McNamara, and so forth. And then when a lot of the people that had been Kennedy's natural supporters became critics of the war, I think he tended to attribute a lot of that--Bobby Kennedy's attitude--to the old fact that he was from Texas.

F: He never really saw it as a moral issue, more as a personal one.

W: Well, I don't know what kind of an ultimate issue he saw it, but he always felt there was a lot of that personal style question involved. I'm sure of that. I think there was a great deal of bitterness in the President about this, feeling that because he was southern or western, somewhat older than the Kennedy group had been, hadn't gone to the Ivy League, they had never truly accepted him or given him his due. As a matter of fact, there's some truth in that.

F: Did he tend to get too close to some reporters at times, so that they almost had to be critical to preserve their own independence?

W: I don't know whether any reporters felt that way or not. Johnson could overwhelm you, all right. And if you weren't careful, you'd find yourself the object of more attention than you really wanted from that point of

view. I never felt myself that I had to be critical in some way in order either to put him on notice that I was not to be bought, or to preserve my self-esteem among my colleagues. I never felt that way about it. I don't think I ever had any reason to, because I was never that close to Johnson.

F: Do you think it was pretty much . . .

W: I can't think who, I don't remember who Johnson's "press pets," if any, were. I don't think you. . . .

F: Of course, Bill White had been a friend since the beginning.

W: Exactly. I don't think you can describe Bill White that way.

F: No.

W: But I suppose, well, there are some reporters in this town--and there is no point at all in going into detail with any names--and I don't even care who's president, Barry Goldwater, or if it's Dr. Spock, they're going to be the biggest supporters of the president. It's not only a sort of a professional in-group thing; it's also that they feel that way about presidents.

F: They belong to the ruling house claque.

W: That's exactly right. That's exactly right. So I suppose he had that, too.

F: Yes.

W: But those people will never feel like criticizing the president. They never do.

F: Right.

W: I think most of us who became critical of the President--I became very critical of Johnson--became critical primarily on two issues. The

first, and overriding everything else, was the war in Vietnam, which I came to think was destroying what otherwise had been the most hopeful presidency in my lifetime. And secondly was the so-called credibility thing.

F: Yes.

W: And those two are almost indistinguishable. There would have been a credibility gap even without Vietnam, but it never would have been critical.

F: Yes. Don't you have an almost built-in credibility gap each [administration]? You've watched four presidents now at your adult level, and it seems to me that the press was getting increasingly critical of Kennedy at the time he was shot.

W: Oh, no question of it.

F: And the honeymoon is ending with Nixon now.

W: That's quite right.

F: And certainly it ended with Eisenhower.

W: That's quite right. And I've come to believe--Horace Busby put this in my mind not long after President Johnson withdrew--that we are probably moving into an era of one-term presidencies. That is not to say that everybody will be defeated.

F: Yes.

W: But that where the assumption has been that you can always win a second term, I think the assumption is going to be now that the presidents are going to be in trouble when they seek re-election for that reason, the problems have become so complex.

I don't think this is aside from the subject of the interview if I just explain my view.

I don't think anymore that the standard of living is the basic American issue. The basic American political issue is something more complex than that: the quality of life.

F: Yes.

W: Schools, race, garbage collection, you know, all sorts of things. And that's very complex. It's very hard. Yet the president's expected to be responsible.

F: It's sort of [inaudible] too.

W: I think it's hard as hell for Presidents to be successful.

F: Yes.

W: And hence, you're getting more criticism. They're resorting more and more to public relations techniques, cosmetics, to appoint commissions, et cetera.

F: Yes.

W: Increases the effect. So that I think you're quite right that [inaudible]. And then, the press, of course, has its own grievous faults.

But I think there is an inherent credibility gap in every administration in. I would say that this has been a growing tendency in the whole post-war period. Only Eisenhower really escaped it, and he was unique. I certainly think that's true.

I think that in President Johnson's case, a whole lot of forces came to fruition while he was in office that would have come to fruition if Kennedy had been in office. Although this is not to discuss the point of whether Kennedy would have done what Johnson did or not.

F: Right.

W: But I'm talking about forces among college students, anti-militaristic sentiment, the ecological crisis. All this sort of thing was coming to fruition then. And Johnson paid for that in many ways. I still think that without the Vietnam War, probably none of that would have been crucial. Johnson would have been a much different president. Vietnam and credibility, I think, are the two things that reporters who either ended up against Johnson or dubious, you'll find most trace it back to one or both of those.

F: Among the press secretaries you've known, who did you find the most effective?

W: Moyers.

F: That's because he spoke, in a sense, from on high or--

W: I didn't work with Jim Hagerty.

F: --because it was Moyers. I suppose Moyers was closer to the President and he'd come nearer saying what the President thinks, anyway.

W: Well it was both things. Moyers was just a fellow that I always felt confidence in dealing with. I also felt what has been suggested to me by some other people at the White House at that time might have

been misplaced. I always felt, too, that Bill spoke very directly and specifically for the President. He certainly purported to be doing so. I don't know of any case that I was involved in at least where that proved to be wrong.

But I'm told now by others that that was one of the things that caused him to leave as he did. He fell into disfavor with the President because he did speak as if for the President, and sometimes he was speaking only for Moyers. Now, I think that's an historical conundrum of the Johnson Administration that I'd like to know about some day. I mean, I'd like to know the answer to it. I state here just what has been alleged to me by other people there. I never really understood why Moyers left the White House. I think there was more to it than that, just that one thing.

F: I've been asking questions on that, and I haven't gotten to see Moyers on this topic. He's not ready.

W: I think it was a combination of things. I think he may have fallen into disfavor. Then there were the stated reasons that he wanted to get out and establish himself as soon [as possible].

F: That's partially correct.

W: And finally, I admire Bill Moyers greatly, he's a friend of mine, and I think he is very astute; I think he is very ambitious. I say all of those things admiringly, not in any way critical. And I think he felt it coming; I think he felt coming what came. And that without literally getting off the sinking ship, I think he saw the better part of good policy as disassociating himself

at that point. I may well be wrong about that and I'm sure that would upset him if I said it to his face, but I'm inclined to think it's true.

F: Did you ever get the silent treatment, or at the opposite end, the complete chewing-out, by the President?

W: He never chewed me out in any really strong sense. He sank some barbs into me on occasion, you know, sometimes to my face, and sometimes behind my back. When I say "behind my back," that sounds as if it were sneaky. I mean sometimes not to my face, to other groups. It was not at all sneaky, because it couldn't help but get back to me, you understand. And I'm like any other reporter. I wrote some stories that were clinkers, you know. They didn't turn out to be true. In this business--not so much the business I'm in now as a columnist, but as a reporter--you have to go sometimes on incomplete information, and as I'm sure you know, you use your intuition, and you use sources that don't always know. And sometimes you interview four guys, and it's the fifth guy that you didn't get to that really knew the story! So he had occasions, sometimes quite legitimately, to sound off about me, and did once or twice to my face, but generally speaking, more nearly in a sort of jovial fashion, when to my face.

Now, he had something sharp to say about me once--I was told by people that were there, a group of reporters--about some story I had written. But my recollection is that indeed it was a clinker. So you can't hold that against him too much. In fact, I'm not sure if anybody got just really chewed out by the President--any reporter. I

always felt that the Kennedy Administration, in a sense, was more vindictive than the Johnson Administration toward reporters who were off the reservation. I had more unpleasant sessions with the Kennedy staff people or whoever, never with President Kennedy personally, but others did. I had more unpleasant kind of repercussions in that administration than I did in the Johnson Administration, even though I was infinitely more critical, in the nature of the case, in the Johnson Administration.

F: Did you have a feeling that the Kennedy staff had more of, in one sense, a sense of mission; and therefore. . . .

W: I think they were more nearly 110 per cent for their man. And this is kind of characteristic of all Kennedy operations.

F: Yes.

W: I'm not saying that the Johnson people were not 100 per cent loyal, but, for instance, just to pick a name out of a hat, I don't think Busby or Harry McPherson or anybody like that, simply because he worked for the President, thought he had to be unpleasant to me because I had written something critical of the President. I think they had, in that sense, a more civilized attitude than the Kennedy people did, particularly the Bobby Kennedy people. The Bobby Kennedy people, many of whom I admire, did tend to be a little sycophantic.

F: Yes.

W: I mean, Bobby, almost literally, could do no wrong. And while I

admired Robert Kennedy, I didn't feel he could do no wrong.

F: Did you make any of these junkets with the President out of the country?

W: Yes. Let's see. I'm trying to think back. I became bureau chief just about when Johnson was elected president in 1964, so that my White House relationship changed rapidly there. But I made the first trip to Hawaii. That was about January of 1966. I made a number of trips around the country with Johnson, a number of trips to Austin, to the Ranch.

F: You got to know that country.

W: Yes.

F: Was Johnson a different man in Texas than what he was in Washington?

W: Well, I think so out at the Ranch; he'd be very relaxed.

F: Was that sentimentality that says that he renewed himself at the Ranch?

W: I don't know that he renewed himself. He was more relaxed. It was his own surroundings down there, and he really was king of it all, and nobody could suggest that he had usurped that from Kennedy, or that he didn't deserve it. I think everybody [feels that]; that's a natural human thing. You know, you've got part of the country. I've got a little farm out here in Virginia, and I go out there and I can really relax. I don't know that that renews me, but I think there's something to all that. And I thought--and I wrote several pieces that you've no doubt seen--early in the Johnson Administration, particularly when we were all going to Texas pretty much for the first time, or at least with new eyes, that it was quite clear that

Johnson was really a very western sort of man.

I made it my business at that time--I went out to see old Dobie--

F: Yes. J. Frank Dobie.

W: --at the University of Texas, who was still alive at that point. Died soon thereafter. Carroll Kilpatrick and I went out and spent an afternoon with the old man. Fascinating man. Because we felt that we ought to know more about the West if we were going to be covering Lyndon Johnson.

So Mr. Dobie gave us a reading list and talked to us. And I worked at it fairly strongly and it became apparent to me, insofar as I understood anything about western life and western traditions, western culture and society, Lyndon Johnson was very western indeed. This was an important part of the man. I think it was. It was a very important part of the--everything keeps coming back to Vietnam. I think it was a very important part of that. I really do. Kind of a tall-in-the-saddle sort of attitude. "They're not going to push us around."

F: Did you ever get the feeling that--this comes up to the present--there is, in a sense, an eastern establishment among the press that is out to gut a man who doesn't fit their ideas on the style of the presidency? In other words, allowing for the humanity of the White House reporters, are they pros and tend to take things as they find them, or do they want men to. . . .

W: No, no. No. I think it's fair to say in the first place, I

think the question of eastern establishment is a little bit off target here. I think there is an eastern establishment in the press, but that tends to have more to do with ideology. And it tends to set a general political tone in American life, having to do with issues, et cetera. I think it's an important thing. But I think that at the time that President Johnson took office, you had quite a different thing in operation. You had had in President Kennedy a very much admired man among the press, even among those who had differed with him politically.

F: Yes.

W: And it didn't matter whether they were from the East, or the West, or where. He was just an attractive guy.

F: Right.

W: And they liked going off to Palm Beach.

F: It beat Stonewall.

W: Right. And they liked having a glamorous woman in the White House and, you know, all this kind of thing, parties at Mount Vernon.

Johnson was quite different, and I think there were a lot of people who didn't make that transition successfully. I suppose you could put up another category of people in there who, for whatever reason over the years, either didn't like or mistrusted Johnson, specifically from his Senate years, or whatever reasons. I know some of those.

F: He had been out front too long.

W: Some of our staff here who felt that Johnson was literally a con man, going back to the eighty-seven vote election, all sorts of things. So

you had that group. And then you had really the Kennedy lovers, one might almost say. And then you had some others, of which I hope I was one, who didn't fit into either of those first groups and who not only wanted Johnson to succeed just as a matter of patriotism almost, but had a high regard for Johnson. I guess you would have to put into there another little thread. There were some of us--I was probably one of these--who had not ever been really accepted at court in the Kennedy Administration.

F: Yes.

W: So that tended to make you think, you know, "this time." So I think there quite definitely got to be a Kennedy-Johnson division in the White House press corps, I would say up to about the time of the Goldwater nomination. Then everything began to fade. It all became different, you know. And people changed there, White House staff. A lot of Texas reporters came up and worked then; various changes were made. So all of that.

But I think it had an importance, not so much that the public was convinced that Johnson was a crude bumpkin, as that Johnson became convinced that the public had been convinced that he was a crude bumpkin. And he developed some attitudes toward the press and so forth that I think were unfortunate, not necessarily unjustified, but unfortunate. And they stuck long past the time where it had any relevance. I don't know if that makes sense or not.

F: Yes. Did Johnson ever think of putting the Times off limits the way Kennedy did?

W: Not that I know of. He'd never do that at all.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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