

INTERVIEW I

DATE: July 23, 1969
INTERVIEWEE: JAMES RUSSELL WIGGINS
INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN
PLACE: Mr. Wiggins' home, Brooklin, Maine

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M: Let's get your identification on here at the beginning, Mr. Wiggins.
You're James Russell Wiggins.

W: James Russell.

M: Your official position with the Johnson Administration at its close was as United States representative to the United Nations, a position to which Mr. Johnson appointed you in the fall of 1968, and you served for a few months. Before that you had been for a substantial length of time the editor and executive vice president of the Washington Post and held previous editorial positions with that paper, I guess, on back into the late 1940s.

W. 1946.

M: Right. You were a Washington correspondent in the thirties even, for a little while. Did you get any knowledge of Mr. Johnson when he was a young congressman then?

W: Not in a very personal way, but I was aware of his presence.

M: Was he considered one of Mr. Roosevelt's fair-haired boys, so to speak, at that time?

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W: He was, and I was aware that he was a supporter of the administration, that he had been identified with it.

M: You went off to work for the New York Times, I believe, for a little while.

W: I was a Washington correspondent to the St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch and then went back to St. Paul as the editor of the St. Paul Pioneer Press and Dispatch. I then went into the armed forces and then out and back to St. Paul as editor of the St. Paul Pioneer Press and Dispatch and then to the New York Times.

M: So you were gone from Washington for [some time].

W: Right, and then to the Washington Post in 1946.

M: That is about the time that Mr. Johnson came to Washington as senator, or a couple of years thereafter. Did you begin to form any close contact with him at about that time?

W: My real knowledge about him really commenced when I returned to the Washington Post.

M: In the late 1940s. What kind of acquaintance did you have with him after that time?

W: Well, he was in the Senate and it was only from time to time in connection with stories that arose about legislative situations in the Senate. He saw different newspapermen from time to time, and I saw him in the course of that period, but not frequently.

M: Your relationship with him was official rather than social?

W: Purely a formal, official relationship as a newspaperman.

M: Was he interested in District of Columbia issues in his senatorial

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years to any great degree?

W: I do not recall that he was especially identified with the problems of the District of Columbia. He may have a very different record of that, but I don't recall it.

M: Of course, those are the issues with which the Post gets so directly involved.

W: They get directly involved with them, but he could have a very important influence on the city government without me knowing it.

M: I see. What kind of press relations did he have in those senatorial years? Were they good or bad?

W: I think he was usually a little acerb with newspapermen. He used to get very upset about what he thought were inaccuracies in news and any misrepresentation of his position.

M: Did he call up individual newspapermen? Did he ever do that to you?

W: Yes, many times, and I would sometimes go up and see him. My real working relationship really commenced--and I was trying to figure what year this was--when the issue arose over a resolution that most of the senators had signed relating to new legislation governing campaign contributions in connection with the conduct of political campaigns.

M: I can't place that either, but the Post, I remember, got very involved in that.

W: The Post is very strongly for this and Philip L. Graham, then president of the Washington Post Company, went up to see Mr. Johnson, who was then the majority leader, about this. As you know,

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that legislation ran aground principally on Albert Gore's insistence that you place a limit on campaign contributions which is not the idea that the Washington Post had nor the idea that Mr. Johnson had. The Post and Senator Johnson thought the important thing was complete publicity and full disclosure and recognized that arbitrary limits on the amount of the expenditures were really meaningless, and led to evasion of the statute, which is almost impossible to stop since it had to do with expenditures by separate committees that might be constituted without the consent and knowledge of the candidate. In spite of the fact that I believe at one time most of the members of the Senate signed a sort of declaration that they intended and wished to have such legislation, Congress never did get around to that legislation at that juncture.

M: Was Mr. Johnson cooperative as far as you know?

W: He was. He was very interested in the whole idea. I think that it was from that time that his acquaintance with Mr. Graham dated. They were both interested in this particular thing, but subsequently they were interested in a great many other things.

M: Yes, they became quite good friends.

W: Yes, indeed, and Mr. Graham greatly admired Senator Johnson from that time on and I remember distinctly that he went up to see him on this particular matter and had even expressed some misgivings about Senator Johnson and came back very excited about him. His principal line of reflection about him had to do with what Mr. Graham thought was his ability to get things done; he thought this

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was a man who was able to make the democratic system work, make the Senate work, make the government work. He had a gift of action within the democratic process and from that interview on, I think he was really a very strong personal supporter. He didn't always go along with him politically, but he had a great admiration for Johnson.

M: He was one of Mr. Johnson's earlier supporters for the presidential nomination.

W: Yes, he was.

M: Are you aware of the activity he carried on in behalf of Mr. Johnson's nomination in 1960--the events leading up to Mr. Johnson's [nomination at the] convention?

W: Yes, indeed. Yes, that's a little bit written out and of course there's that memo that represents all I know about it.

M: That represents the sum total of what happened?

W: The President himself gave me at one time a very interesting and, to me, an extremely amusing account. We had a story about a headquarters being opened for Johnson in a Washington hotel--the Ambassador, I believe.

M: Before the convention?

W: Yes. George Reedy was the--

M: Walter Jenkins?

W: --prime mover and Walter Jenkins set up this headquarters while Mr. Johnson was out of town. They had a banner out in the street "Johnson for President." He came back to town and ordered it taken down. We had a funny story about this episode in type. Our reporters

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had gotten it from Reedy, and Reedy learned about this, of course, and called up and really begged us not to run the story. He said that Mr. Johnson would be furious with him, but we ran the story. At a much later date, after he was vice president, he told me that it was Sam Rayburn who had told Reedy and Jenkins to open this headquarters and that Senator Johnson had come home and ordered it dismantled. Then he had gone back to his office and Sam Rayburn had called him and asked him to come over and see him and he had gone over to see the Speaker and the Speaker then had said that-- Now if you've gotten this from a dozen other sources, there's no use repeating [it].

M: No, I haven't, this is a new one.

W: Then the Speaker said to him, "Lyndon, you've been the beneficiary of every favor that the Democratic Party can bestow upon a man. You've been made a congressman and a senator, before that a federal appointee, all at the hands of the Democratic Party. It's been a kind of a one way street; the party has done a lot of things for you and now the time has come when you can do something for the Democratic Party. If you don't get in there and make a struggle for this nomination, it's going to go by default to that young man from Massachusetts. And if he gets it without any opposition or any competition, the whole country will say that his daddy has bought him the nomination of the Democratic Party for the presidency."

M: Which a lot of them said anyway.

W: "That he had won it solely because of that influence and that the

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Democratic Party will have on its hands a Catholic candidate that is supposed to have purchased the nomination and we'll wind up with Nixon as president of the United States. Whether you want to or not, you're going to run for that nomination. If you have any sense of indebtedness to the party, you have got to do it."

So with that ringing in his ears, Mr. Johnson agreed to permit Jenkins and Reedy to go ahead with his campaign. Of course, he didn't enter any primaries. But he became the only substantial opposition there was, particularly after the failure of Humphrey in West Virginia. Well, I mentioned this because it fits into the next step which is that he later told me that it was Sam Rayburn who had told him that he had to take the nomination for the vice presidency. After having previously elicited from him a promise that he wouldn't take it, he then called him up from Texas and told him that he had to take it.

M: For the same reasons, for the good of the party?

W: For the same reasons, for the good of the party. That if Kennedy ran and didn't have somebody like Senator Johnson on the ticket that the Baptist South and the Populist areas resentful of Kennedy's family wealth would defeat him. So Rayburn figured in both of these episodes, whether decisively or not, I don't know.

M: Certainly importantly, though. Mr. Johnson told you both those stories which--

W: I did know of one thing also which he later told me about. You mentioned the Roosevelt Administration and you probably heard this

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from a dozen stories--how he got the Rural Electrification Project in the Pedernales Valley. I don't know whether I can recapture it.

M: Go ahead.

W: He said that here he was, a young congressman, trying to get REA through that area which didn't have any rural power and that he had tried several times to get an appointment with the President to discuss this. I think once or twice it had been sort of, in Roosevelt's typical way, filibustered out of getting to the point. But finally he did get in to see Roosevelt and got enough time to really lay out his proposal: that this valley was immediately adjacent to Colorado Power; great lines had gone over it, but it still had no lines of its own, no local electricity. Roosevelt heard him out and then called up the director of the REA who was the man who had been in charge of the CCC.

M: Harry Hopkins?

W: No, that was the WPA. This was--I know his name very well, but I can't think of it. [Roosevelt] called him up to talk to him about it while [Lyndon] was there and he laid out the project to him over the telephone and he said, "Well, we have a standard in the REA that there have to be so many patrons per mile. Unfortunately this project, on that account, couldn't qualify because there aren't enough people per each mile, enough taps on the line to make it feasible." Then, Johnson recalling it said that the President said to the administrator, "Certainly you have to have a standard like that in order to keep the federal money from just

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being disbursed to uneconomic projections, but," he said, "you know those cedar choppers down there in the Pedernales, Mr. Johnson tells me, multiply so fast that by the time you authorize this land and get it built there will be four of them to a mile," or whatever the standard was. So they went ahead and they okayed the project and electricity was brought to the Pedernales Valley. (Laughter)

M: You mention these occasions on which he told you these stories at a later time. What kind of instance does someone who is in your position see the President?

W: Well, that particular story he told me at a party that was given him at the F Street Club by a group of his friends after the election in which he was elected vice president.

M: He didn't call in editors like he called in newsmen and conducted long conversations or monologues?

W: No, I frequently asked to see him and went over to see him quite often. And when he was vice president, I went up to see him quite frequently.

M: Would this be on issues?

W: Some issues would be up, you know--some measures in which we were both interested and in which the paper was interested, and in which he was an authority; he was, you know, on a great many things. He was not a passive vice president. A lot of people get the impression he was, and it might have been because they think vice presidents are. But he was very active.

M: Do you think he was pretty unhappy as vice president based on your

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knowledge of him or not?

W: No, a curious thing was that John F. Kennedy was up for lunch with the editorial group that frequently had visitors at the Washington Post in early 19[60] after West Virginia. A question came up of whether Senator Johnson would accept the vice presidential nomination and many people said that he was so active that he wouldn't accept it. I was always of the opinion that he would and I reasoned that he would because he had used the power and influence of a majority leader to its limit and he couldn't do anything more to gild the reputation that he already had as a legislative manager and that if he wanted to go anywhere else, he would soon have to do it. And, secondly, that he would find distasteful the role of majority leader and a distinct subordinate to a man who had been a young and junior colleague in the Senate. I thought that if he had the chance that these two things would surely cross his mind and that I believed he would take the nomination. I thought so from the beginning, so I wasn't particularly surprised.

Phil Graham called me up when he finally was nominated and said, "You've got your ticket." I didn't go to the convention; I was in Washington. He called me up and said, "Well, the ticket you nominated has been nominated here." (Laughter) So I remember that distinctly. And I had seen him from time to time and there was a third reason, I think, that moved him: he needed an interval to fill in his home background in foreign affairs and to divest himself of a parochial Texas reputation which the vice presidency would do

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for him.

M: Do you think it did that for him? Mr. Kennedy gave him enough opportunity to operate?

W: Certainly. He made all these trips to Vietnam, Pakistan and Europe and the Berlin Wall. There isn't any doubt about it. I think it lifted him clear out of his strictly state character and made a national figure out of him. It's hard to believe that a majority leader isn't a national figure, but he retained a distinctly parochial regional stature before he was vice president. No one knows what would have happened if he had continued as vice president, but I think he grew enormously in the vice presidency as a national figure and would have continued to have grown if there had been a second John F. Kennedy term. He would have been a power to have coped with in the first convention after the second Kennedy Administration.

M: What about after the assassination? Did you see him shortly after that?

W: I saw him afterward. I remember that he was hardly sworn in before I got a phone call, as I'm sure a great many other people did, in which he just said simply that he was going to need the help of everybody in American life to assume the burdens that had been thrust upon him by this tragedy.

M: Did he mention any particular worries that he had?

W: No, it was really in general terms. Of course, I think the Washington Post carried an editorial which I wrote immediately saying that the thing to bear in mind was the continuity of American government; the

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rise or fall of individuals, as great as the tragedy was, the country was to go forward.

M: It wasn't very long before some of the journalists who were really Kennedy loyalist types were taking some shots at Mr. Johnson. Do you think they set out in a calculated way to destroy [him]?

W: Oh, I don't think so. I'm sure, because this was a peculiarly personal administration and especially a personal administration, they felt a greater severance of continuity than they would have if John F. Kennedy had been a long-time leader of the Democratic Party. It was a victory of a personal political party so that when his death came in such a tragic way, the impact was especially great and their sense of abandonment and desolation and alienation was probably greater than it otherwise would have been. If there is any evidence of a movement from the very beginning to destroy the new President, I would have been aware of it.

M: Do you think some of the Kennedy aides and staff people might have leaked news unfavorable to the President to newsmen?

W: No, I wouldn't make that charge. I don't believe it partook of that nature and in fact President Johnson handled the early months of that period so skillfully that I believe the impulse didn't arise and it would have been evident. I doubt that there was any deliberate effort to destroy him.

M: One of the mysteries, it seems to me, is that in 1964 Mr. Johnson's press was very good and everything seemed to be going very well. Then by the end of his administration the press was so determinedly

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in opposition it seemed.

W: This is characteristic in American history.

M: That much difference, do you think? That good turned to that bad requires no real explanation, do you think?

W: The Hoover situation was an absolute parallel. Hoover had the best press of any president up to his time.

M: Right, right.

W: And he left with the worst press a president ever had.

M: And again because of an event that turned people pretty much opposed.

W: Truman was a greater parallel. Truman came in as Roosevelt's vice president with a press that was extremely sympathetic and supported him extraordinarily well, and he retired with 30 per cent poll, so I don't think it's uncharacteristic.

M: You think the creditability gap was no worse under Johnson than it was under any of his predecessors?

W: No, I think it was a much exaggerated issue myself.

M: That's interesting and this is the kind of comment from someone who is a real professional in a field that we like to get.

What about his relative obsession with secrecy? Did that cause him difficulties with the press--the stories that you hear about him changing appointments because they were leaked and things of this nature?

W: Yes, I don't know why he felt that anxious about disclosure, but I guess he did. But that also is more or less human and has many

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precedents in the relations of presidents. (Interruption)

I once wrote down a quote from an inscription of William the Silent. It was in The Life of William the Silent. It's his description of Philip of Spain and his attitude toward premature disclosure of anything that he intended to do.

M: Goes back that far?

W: It was sort of funny, it was so apropos. But I'm afraid I've mislaid it.

M: So you can't say that obsession of secrecy is exactly a new thing? Did he actually, to your knowledge, change policy or appointments on instances?

W: I don't know that he changed policies or appointments, but you know nearer at hand, Roosevelt had a project called the Shelter Belt Project in 1937. He had scheduled to build a high shelter belt, having built some sections of it in the Dakotas, in Nebraska, going to one from Minnesota and the Dakotas in Texas. There was a premature disclosure of it before he was ready to act on it and he scotched it.

M: So that, too, goes back.

W: I think statesmen have frequently done this. Sometimes a disclosure may show up a defect in the policy that they hadn't hitherto been aware of. And its very premature release can cause the alteration of the policy for the sound and pregnant reason that they know of any confidence in the policy.

Excuse me a minute. I'm going to see if I can put my hands on something that is so funny.

(Interruption)

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M: You're pretty good to find one quotation in all those cards.

W: This is about Philip II. "Events had no right to be born throughout his dominions without a preparatory course of his obstetrical pedantry." (Laughter). That's Motley on Philip of Spain.

M: That could have been written by one of the academics who didn't care for Mr. Johnson's policies in this regard.

W: "Without the preparatory course of his obstetrical pedantry."

M: In line with that, what about his style? Newspaper reporters are sophisticated types frequently. Did just Mr. Johnson's southwestern Texas accent and earthiness irritate the reporters?

W: It did.

M: And that colors their reporting, I suppose, if that's the way they feel.

W: I've always thought that the President made a mistake in his opening days by trying to deal with the reporters as friends and colleagues. That period finally came to an end with the stories about his fast driving and other things that he thought were a breach of his hospitality. Then there was probably a period when he was invariably available to the press. For all we talk about a credibility gap, no president has been as available to the press as this man has been, to my knowledge. I don't know of any president who's been this accessible and where entree to the White House and to other people was as ready. Many of the episodes of impatience of premature release were amusing and petty rather than

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on grand problems; they were often on very trivial things.

But, of course, John F. Kennedy had the same attitude toward disclosure before he was ready for it and called up the editors and complained about reporters and called up reporters and exhibited his impatience and tried to find out who leaked. On one occasion, he had summoned in a whole lot of his staff and gave them a dressing down until someone reminded him that he himself had talked to Phil Graham the day before.

M: He was the leak.

W: It was an exception, but[as] I say, the President went through these stages at the time when he was trying to treat these reporters as friends and colleagues and there is a natural antipathy between the presidency and the press, an institutional antipathy that was inevitable. The president has one approach to public affairs and the press is bound to have another and to try to cover this over with a cordiality only leads to misunderstanding between the president and members of the press within my view. I agree with the Walter Lippmann argument that they should hold each other at arm's length and I think that that got his presidency off on the wrong foot myself.

M: Did he continue the practice of calling editors, for example, about reporters or going above reporters' heads to you or to Phil Graham.

W: He often called me and he often called Graham.

M: About specific stories?

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W: About specific stories. So did Kennedy.

M: What does an editor do in that case? Do you go to the reporter?

Or do you just--?

W: Oh, you run it out. If there is a mistake, you try to do something about it. I think it has been done in all of the administrations and I don't object to that. That's part of what I regard as a natural contest. The administration has an anxiety of getting a thing told one way and a newspaper has got an anxiety to tell it the other way. Presidents aren't to be hung for trying to get their point of view across and editors, if they are any good, ought to be able to resist undue pressure without going hysterical over this kind of forth and back.

M: Right.

W: Then there followed an intimate access period which I think he probably overdid. Then he kind of tapered off that period. Eisenhower always had a good press. Eisenhower was never on a first name basis with anybody in the gallery.

M: And Johnson was?

W: And Johnson was. Eisenhower had an entirely different relationship, I suppose, partly springing from his different background. After all, President Johnson started off with a long first name association with, I suppose, hundreds of reporters from his days in the Senate, so I have to admit that it wasn't as easy for him to set up this arms' length relationship from which I think Eisenhower greatly profited. He always remained a sort of remote father

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figure and thus escaped some of the rough and tumble treatment that the press gave Johnson almost as an equal. I mean reporters didn't feel reticent about attacking him, because he was accessible and available and intimate and had a long relationship with them.

M: What about his press secretaries? Did they serve him well or ill?

W: I think he was served quite well on the whole.

M: You don't think that was one of the difficulties was the--

W: Of course, I think Steve Early was a great press secretary. I think that Eisenhower's, [James] Hagerty, was an extremely able press secretary. I suppose the best press secretary in terms of presenting a favorable light to the country that any administration ever had. I suppose that he had more latitude than any press secretary ever had.

M: Johnson didn't have men of that caliber, but you think those aren't the reasons?

W: I think he was not served inadequately. As he started out, he kept [Pierre] Salinger on for a little while.

M: Yes, about six months.

W: Then George [Reedy] came on and Bill Moyers. Reedy had the confidence of the press.

M: Yes, he went back a long way.

W: And respected the press.

M: Then Moyers.

W: And Moyers was capable, but none of them had the relationship that

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Early had with Roosevelt of an associate in his pre-presidential years who was able to tell him when he was wrong and talk back to him and deal with him on a basis of relative equality. Reedy was always very much of a subordinate person because he had no relationship but that of a subordinate. And Moyers, let's face it, was a rank amateur when he went into that job and acquired great facility in it. You can't put your finger on any great gaffe or flaw in their handling of the press. It seems to me they were pretty--

M: Speaking of Moyers, this is a little bit off the subject, but you might be able to get an answer on the record. One of Mr. Johnson's critics has written that Phil Graham liked Moyers so well that he bought Newsweek to give to Bill Moyers. Is there any word of truth to that?

W: Newsweek?

M: Yes, I read that just the other day.

W: That is absolutely ridiculous! Moyers didn't figure anywhere in that. I think Phil was impressed with Moyers. He spoke to me about him frequently after coming back to see Johnson, but that's ridiculous.

M: It is useful to get a denial though because that's the kind of thing that sometimes gets into the histories. What about the charges that some of the Johnson people made? I don't think that Mr. Johnson, to my knowledge, ever said this, but I have heard some of his advisors say something about that they call a Times-Post-Newsweek axis which was supposed to be greatly biased against the Johnson

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Administration by the last part of it. Do you think the Eastern Seaboard press was guilty of genuine looking with suspicion upon the Johnson Administration that might have caused that kind of suspicion?

W: Well, I don't know where that idea came from. The Washington Post was not, to my opinion, hostile to the President, but you asked earlier about the matter of style. I think that Johnson's style was one that many reporters trained in eastern colleges and moving in the polite circles in the East never came to understand. I had a different view of his style. I like Johnson's style. It was the kind of style with which all westerners, whether Southwest or Middle West, are familiar, which is a curious way of mixing a chaffing, good-humored kind of country wit with serious matters in a way that, to some people, would seem probably frivolous or irresponsible. That's not quite the right word--frivolous is a better word. They often, I think, resent the intrusion of this kind of humor and metaphor into serious matters. I found that a natural and quite engaging way of lightening the grim seriousness of the conduct of public business and it never bothered me.

He was a great chaffer, you know, and because he does everything that he does with enormous application to the instant problem, sometimes I'm sure to many people it seemed overwhelming. I remember one time he called the Washington Post when I was out and asked for me. He had some problem that had to do with the education bill and my secretary said she thought Mr. Friendly could deal with that

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if he was in a hurry. So he said, yes, that he would talk to Friendly. He talked to Friendly and so I never called him back. I came in later and she told me and I went and saw Mr. Friendly and he had indeed talked to the President.

A day later the phone rang and my secretary said, "The President's on the phone." I went to the phone and he said, "I know you're much too busy a man and have many too important things on your mind to return a telephone call to the President of the United States."

(Laughter) "Every time I call you, you are either on vacation or you are taking a rest or you're in conference or you're out of the office." I said, "Just a minute, Mr. President, let me off. What do you want?" He laughed and then went on and said, "Well, here with this education bill, the Post had been supporting federal aid to education for ten years." We'd turned Mrs. Meyer loose on him to argue for federal aid to education. "Now here the bill was up in Congress," he said--this is a new phrase to me--"Now we are up in the lick lock and you've got a chance to pass this bill and what you do in the next seventy-two hours will have more effect than everything you have done for the last twenty years." I said, how do we do something to help him get this bill through? Well, I only cite this story because he made this kind of a call to me frequently.

But it was characteristic of his kind of chaffing approach that he had which I found, as I say, in the most breezy western tradition, and I think some excessively dignified people were put off by this sort of

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approach and did not understand this method of doing business. And the other thing, I don't think they understood the intensity of this man. I don't know anybody who focuses this narrowly and sharply on the situation immediately at hand as he does. It is a kind of capacity for turning singlemindedly to an issue immediately at hand, to a problem immediately to be dealt with, to an obstacle to be instantly surmounted which employs a sharpness of focus many people are unaccustomed to.

M: And that can, as you say, work the wrong way on some who don't have that background.

W: Some people don't understand this. Like I say, I thought I understood it and I accepted it as a kind of chaffing approach that a man is entitled to make to someone he knew and regarded in a friendly way and he loved to blister people, as you know. I mean, he just loved to do it. And yet he never, ever offended me. I halfway, I must say, enjoyed it. He is gifted at it. He really had a talent for mimicry and hyperbole and taking a position and making you look ridiculous which is, as I say, all part of the game. But I think some people were put off by this kind of thing--people I think excessively dignified and accustomed to a different way of dealing with things. I think that he often felt this and correctly appreciated the fact and appraised an antipathy and felt that it was there and I think he was right to feel it. He could sense that these people were not from the milieu in which he had grown up. Many of them, I think--he

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would never have had the support or understanding or sympathy of many people and many people in the press, no matter what he did. This is curious.

M: It is curious.

W: A chemical lack of affinity.

M: What about his performance on the District of Columbia as president? Did he begin to show more interest than he had?

W: In the District of Columbia as president? He has done more than any other president in the history of the United States.

M: It is important, I think, because I think Mr. [Eric] Goldman, for example, makes a big point of Johnson not understanding metro America.

W: Mr. Goldman doesn't know what he is talking about. This man paid more attention to the District of Columbia than any president in history, far more than Roosevelt who really treated the District of Columbia like an orphan child. I mean, you know, he appointed Russ Young, correspondent of the Evening Star as a commissioner, almost the way an imperial Byzantine potentate would appoint the court jester to some job to show his contempt for a remote province. He did nothing to reorder the structure of the District government.

M: But Johnson appointed good people?

W: The President mastered the essential problems of the District of Columbia, spent countless hours on discussion of the problem. I think that the Washington Post may have complicated his life and

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probably rendered the District no service because we shared in the responsibility for setting up Charles Horsky as a sort of District representative on the staff for the President. Other presidents had had individuals who had, among other duties, the duty of looking after the District of Columbia. Eisenhower had a chap who did that and Kennedy had individuals around him who paid some attention to it, but Johnson set up Charles Horsky in this job.

M: And that was his one job?

W: Who had nothing else to do for the President but [be] the President's assistant on District affairs. This was a solution that had emerged. Maybe Kennedy appointed Horsky in the first place, but he continued.

M: Stayed on, yes.

W: This suggestion was made by the Post. It came as a result of Robert Kennedy and the Justice Department raising some questions about the District affairs and not being able to get a satisfactory answer in his opinion. But it was broken in a way that alienated [Walter] Tobriner and I thought for a long time Tobriner was a first-class man and it may have been an awkward arrangement because it sort of terminated the channels of Tobriner to the White House. It didn't work out as well as it might have. In any case, he kept Horsky out and probably devoted more time and attention to it and then, of course, he did press the home rule bill. But for the Watts episode, it would have passed, and the President himself rightly recognized that the defeat of the home rule bill was a

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watermark in the turning of the tide. It was the first real legislative defeat he had and he did everything to get that bill passed but beyond that he was interested in the District everywhere.

M: Of course, Lady Bird. . .

W. And Lady Bird. There is no president that is even close in the running, anywhere near him.

M: You know, the press or some of his opponents made fun, I think, of Lady Bird's beautification program, but I've heard people who have lived in Washington for many years comment on what a really drastic change for the better in the general appearance of Washington [it has made].

W: Yes, there is no doubt about that, but much more importantly, they projected the whole change in the District government, at least changed the commissioner form of government from a three-headed monster into an orderly administrative set-up. Then he induced Murphy to come in to head up the public safety departments dealing with crime, and he was intensely and actively interested in the welfare agencies of the government. No, I don't have the slightest doubt in the world in saying that any objective student of the relationships of President Johnson to the District who knew anything about earlier administrations simply couldn't avoid the conclusion that this man showed more interest and concern and undertook more constructive actions regarding the District than any other president.

M: That's pretty high praise.

W: I couldn't make it stronger.

M: When you first discover that you were being considered for a

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major cabinet level diplomatic appointment in late 1968?

W: Well, I discovered it the day it happened.

M: A long consideration.

W: Wednesday, September 24, the White House called me at five o'clock and the President was on the phone wanting to know why I wasn't at work.

M: (Laughter) Same old thing, you are either off or something.

W: He said he had heard that I was leaving the Post on my sixty-fifth birthday and I said that was right, that I was. I said the man who had the biggest job in the country was leaving it without reproach so I was, too. Then he said, "That's not right. I'm still on the job." And then he said, "For twenty years you have been second-guessing me on my public actions and criticizing me for lack of decisions, wrong decisions," and so he thought it only fair that he had a chance to second-guess and criticize me. I said, "Now, what's coming?" And he said, "George Ball's departure," about which I didn't even know at the time and nobody else knew it. It made it necessary to find a successor immediately.

He said that he had thought it over and he could have put in [John] McCloy or let Rusk take care of it on an acting basis in addition to his other duties or he could have picked some lawyer. But he got to thinking that he really ought to do something else than just fill the gap, he really ought to have someone who could make a contribution on their own, and then he got to thinking, why not, instead of getting an editor, get an editor, a publisher,

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and he said that he immediately thought of me. He thought that I had been writing about foreign affairs all my life and knew enough about it so that I could function as an ambassador and chairman to the United States delegation to the United Nations. He said Joe Sisco would help and Secretary Rusk said he understood Ball's feelings and he [Ball] had a conscientious urge to help Humphrey. He thought Humphrey was being given a hard time and he needed some political help from a man like Ball who had been through two campaigns. The campaign wasn't getting off the ground.

He said he didn't agree with everything Ball said, but he didn't agree with everything Lady Bird said. (Laughter) But in spite of any differences, Ball was loyal and faithful and effective. I think that sentence right there says a lot about Johnson because he didn't agree with Ball and he had in some quarters a curious reputation for being a man who didn't tolerate dissent or opposition around him. Nothing could have proven this more. He remained friendly, on the most friendly personal terms with Ball, in spite of differences.

Then I said, well, before I did anything else, I'd have to let Katherine Graham know. And he said, "There you go, hiding behind a woman's skirts." I said, "That's all right, Mr. President, you have been doing that for twenty years, forty years." He laughed and said, well, when could I let him know? I said, "I'll let you know at breakfast time, by eight o'clock tomorrow morning." He laughed and said he was glad to hear my voice and I sounded full of zip and he was glad of that, and he would be waiting for me to call him,

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but he wouldn't answer the phone if it was no.

So I called at eight o'clock and I found out later a very curious thing. He had actually slept in that morning and he wasn't at breakfast at eight o'clock. I talked to Mrs. Graham and talked to Beebe-- Frederick Beebe, chairman of the board of the Washington Post company. So then I called back to the President, did get hold of him about ten, I guess, and said that probably no man alive had offended as many people on the Hill as I had and I didn't know even if he wanted me, if he could get me confirmed. He said he'd take care of that. I said, "Okay, you take care of it, but I think before you make any announcements, you ought to sound out a few senators and find out if they are absolutely adamant." He said he'd do that but he wasn't afraid of that. He'd have McPherson and Califano check, and he said Ball's announcement was to be made at four o'clock and he would like to say that I would succeed him or that he was trying to get me to accept the appointment. I said if he said anything about me at all, he'd better say that I had accepted it because I didn't like those situations in which somebody was disclosed as having been asked and you had to say later that they had declined. I didn't think you should publicly decline anything the President asked you to do. You may have to decline it, but you should never decline it publicly.

Then I asked him what was the protocol on serving--whether an ambassador appointee ever served in advance of confirmation or whether he had to wait till confirmed. He said, "No, they have to be confirmed first."

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M: As I recall, he did then announce you at the same time.

W: Yes. But then he was to call me back, you see. That was at ten o'clock. He called me back at four o'clock and said he made some checks with Senator Aiken, Senator Sparkman, Dirksen and I also asked him to check with the FBI. He asked me when I could be in Washington and I said I thought I would come down over the weekend--that was on Thursday--and I might meet Rusk and Sisco at New York. Rusk had already called me then. I said it would take me about ten hours to get there. Then he said he'd have a Jetstar for me at Bangor at six o'clock! I was in the middle of doing a lot of things around here. I hadn't cleared my boat out yet. I was getting ready to take the gear off my boat and I got my car repaired and had my car wheels, was getting them repaired. So I got on the plane at six o'clock and went to Washington.

M: Did he give you any further instructions about what he wanted you to do?

W: When I got there that evening, we had a long conference in the Cabinet Room; I think we sat in there and talked with [Walt] Rostow. They both briefed me very extensively on what they thought the problems were at the U.N. Then I had further briefings from Rostow personally and spent the next several days at the State Department.

M: The consensus of the opinion of a lot of the analysts seems to

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be that the Johnson Administration didn't think too highly of the United Nations by that point in its career. Do you think that's [true]?

W: No. I don't think that's true at all. I think that was a New York Times story. I don't believe that at all. I mean I don't say that he thought very highly of U Thant.

M: They were still having their troubles based on U Thant's--

W: Allegation that we had not acted on some openings for peace which I really think myself were ridiculous. I think U Thant was not very fair to the United States in this matter myself. From every utterance of his, you get the idea that the whole thing was our fault--that we had neglected to exploit the peace offerings.

I certainly got no impressions from him or from Rusk that they regarded the U.N. as unimportant. How could they? No president of the United States could regard it as unimportant even if he felt it had only a public relations importance or a propaganda importance. It still had an enormous importance as a world forum even if you may despair over its ability to act in some areas. Then the President was very clear about the emphasis that he put upon the special agencies. Apart from the central political forums like the Security Council and the General Assembly, Economic Development and so on were always very important in his mind.

M: What about the United Nations mission? There is a fairly recent book out. I know you weren't there too long and you weren't a man with a big political constituency of your own, but I'm sure you are aware of Mr. Beichman's book The Other State Department in

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which he argues about the mission's separate role. Do you think there is anything to that at all?

W: I think not. I think he exaggerates that. I think there is a problem and it's worse with national public figures than it is with career diplomats or with people who do not have national political ambition. In a sense, I think my situation was more like that of a career diplomat than it was like a public figure in spite of the fact that I didn't have a diplomatic career in the sense that I didn't expect to make the diplomatic policy of the government of the United States from New York.

M: And you weren't running for anything either?

W: No, the point is I didn't have to worry about the impact upon my national image, if I had to advocate something that I had previously opposed or opposed something I had previously advocated, which is a consideration with men like [Henry Cabot] Lodge or Adlai Stevenson. It is a consideration. They have a constituency. Well, I didn't have any constituency to worry about. I would not relish doing things that, as an editor, I had opposed or opposing things I had supported, but it's not quite the same situation as a man who has been a candidate for the presidency or a man who has a constituency of his own and hopes to be a candidate for the presidency. I had nothing to gain or lose in terms of being a national figure, but I know from subsequent information Rusk has given me, this was the President's idea. This appointment was strictly his idea.

M: It didn't come through the State Department?

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W: It didn't come through anybody else.

M: But the State Department cooperated with you well as far as you can tell?

W: No, we had differences on many issues between the international offices of the State Department. We differed on many things. I was very disappointed that they didn't go right down the lines supporting the larger appropriation for the UN Development Corporation of Hoffman's and weren't able to get anywhere near the amount of money that I thought it should have had. And I would have found that money, I think, some way or another, if I'd been the President or the Secretary of State. So we differed on that. I think that early in the Middle Eastern thing the President very strongly stressed to me that they had the opportunity to do something to get peace in the Middle East at this session of the General Assembly. I felt more strongly than the State Department did that the Russians really did want to not have this thing blow up again, and I don't mean by that that they have a devoted interest in peace. I think they have a self interest, a selfish interest. I believe it was genuine and after many conferences with some of them, I think I was more convinced of that.

M: The Nixon people made a big deal out of the four power talks they began after they came in. Had the Johnson Administration ruled out the four power meeting?

W: We were standoffish about the four power thing. That was the department's view and that was my own view and I think the Nixon

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Administration only embraced it because they couldn't avoid it from an appearance standpoint. But the misgivings that you are bound to have about it arose from the fact the Israeli had said from the beginning that they wouldn't accept any kind of dictated settlement and the Arab world said they won't accept a dictated settlement. There is still in my mind doubts that the four power formula will bring about the settlement in May.

M: Certainly not yet.

W: It hasn't made any progress. I was not in favor of it.

M: You agreed with the department?

W: I agree with the department. I think the best hope for peace was the Jarring mission and there isn't anything that the members of the Jarring mission could do more than to back [Gunnar] Jarring. I mean, the members of the big four could [not] do better than to back up Jarring at every juncture. The period that I spent there I spent a good half of my time on the Middle Eastern thing. So did [William] Buffum and [Richard] Pederson. We all three spent that time trying to nudge alternately the Arabs and the Israeli on cue from Jarring as to where they needed nudging, trying to get them to be more forthcoming in their conversations with him. That was really the gist of our effort. I still think that in the end there was, for an interval, great hope in the Jarring mission, but it became pretty clear toward the end that the Israeli were determined to hang onto Sharm el Sheikh. That was the first thing: they clearly were not going to yield Sharm el Sheikh back. I think runs straight across the Resolution 2412

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about the fruits of conquest and I'm not saying the Israeli are to blame more than the Arabs are to blame. If I had responsibility for the Israel government, I certainly would not give up any territory until I got something better than I had before in a way of a permanent peace.

M: And little has been offered apparently.

W: And I think they are entitled to use the conquest to achieve that, but I'm afraid that in the long interval since the 1967 war that the longer it goes, those territories taken by conquest become more and more incorporated in the territories of the Israeli and incorporated in the minds of the Israeli as being their territory.

M: Absolutely.

W: In other words, they are not being retained as a means to get a better, broader, bigger bargain. They are being retained as acquisitions that have virtue per se. This is why I think the Arab world was stupid not to press for an early settlement linking withdrawal and a permanent peace in the region. The longer they wait, the tougher it is.

M: You said Mr. Johnson made that point very strongly to you about the Middle East.

W: Yes. He was extremely concerned about the Middle East.

M: Did he follow then on afterwards and stay current on it?

W: Yes, he did.

M: Did he ever play any personal role as far as talking to the principals in any case?

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W: No, I think not. You see, we were really up to our eyes in our own problems, but the department--Joe Sisco spent about three days a week in New York and as I say an enormous percentage of the total effort of the mission was devoted to this problem.

M: In fact Sisco has now been moved to that geographical area?

W: Yes.

M: What about Vietnam? Was there any action left at the United Nations by the time you got there going on about Vietnam at all?

W: No, you see the big international thing was the Czech crisis which was laid out in the Secretary's opening speech. The foreign ministers usually make that and we have nearly always heretofore. The State Secretaries made it, so he made it before I got up there.

M: Right.

W: The Vietnam thing was very diminuendo as far as the attention it got in the Assembly.

M: How bad was the fallout? You were in a good position, maybe, to comment on that. The critics have always said one of the things that was bad about our Vietnam involvement was it affected us so adversely all over the rest of the world. Was there considerable opposition among the U.N. diplomats that you talked to to our policy?

W: At that interlude, it's curious how secondary it was. I mean, the Czech crisis was assuming such dimensions that an overwhelming number of speeches in the General Assembly session turned on that and I think that crisis in turn made nonsense out of some of the

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loose remarks about American aggression, made the spectacle of the Russians actually going into a country without any pretext of having been invited in.

M: Made Vietnam be a kind of secondary--?

W: Mild, you know, a different deal. But there was a great deal of emphasis on that and on the related question of negotiating on the ABM. As you know, President Johnson was ready to announce--

M: Right. The day before.

W: --these negotiations the day before when they went into Czechoslovakia. My own view throughout was that we should go ahead with the negotiations and I think that the President wished to but for a while felt that it just looked too indifferent to the character of the Czech crisis to sit down with these people with blood on their hands, and by the fact of sitting down with them almost giving a backhanded acknowledgment that what they had done wasn't too bad. So he had an impulse to defer at the time of the Czech crisis and some others did, too. I think that was very much in Secretary Rusk's mind and while we never had any confrontation over it, I think I was a little more for going ahead than he was on the theory that the Russians did this all the time. You can pursue a dual policy; you can denounce the hell out of them on Czechoslovakia and talk disarmament at the same time.

M: We've done that before.

W: And in a way the more you feared them and mistrusted them and abhorred them, the better the argument for trying to settle the arms thing

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with them.

M: They were still willing to talk, I take it.

W: Yes, they had a dinner that the Secretary had with them, and many conferences I had with them. The deputy foreign minister they sent over here was very eager to talk and then the President began to crank up again if you remember.

M: Right. There were a lot of rumors right toward the end of the year.

W: We had a meeting of the National Security Council in which I made a general report on the United Nations and I got to this issue and the President questioned me very closely about the attitude of our European allies and I told him that, in my opinion, they wanted us at this point to go ahead and he said he had had different information from some sources. He asked Sisco--Sisco was there too--and me to go back and recanvass and send him a report back on what their attitude was and we did.

M: It was favorable?

W: Yes, it was favorable. And then I believe that he sounded out. By that time Nixon had been elected. I believe the incoming administration indicated that they didn't want him to go ahead.

M: Right. So he gave it up then?

W: Now I enter a comment here that I don't know this.

M: Right.

W: Somewhere I got that impression that that's what happened.

M: You did attend Cabinet meetings in that last few months?

W: Yes.

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M: Are Cabinet meetings and National Security Council meetings mostly cosmetic things?

W: No, I didn't think the National Security Council meetings were. I must say I attained a very favorable impression of the President's attention and his ability to leap on a sixty-four dollar question at anybody's presentation.

M: But they were real substantive sessions?

W: Yes, the Security Council was. One meeting had a report on the agency that was supposed to do the stockpiling and I thought that was really almost strictly so pro forma and no give and take. I thought the President at the Security Council meetings that I attended was extremely good. Of course no president in modern times has used the cabinet as a national council of state and I don't believe that Johnson would say that he did. He used it a lot more than Kennedy did.

M: That seems to be the case.

W: But I don't know that any modern president has used it the way Washington did when he got written opinions of all the cabinet members.

M: Right.

W: Can I revert back to one thing? When the President recounted to me the story that he had thought of my appointment, he said, "You know, I was lying awake there at night and the thought came to me at three o'clock in the morning that I'd get you to do it." I said, "Well, Mr. President,"--there was other people around--"that

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has a certain ring of implausibility to it," and he looked at me and said, "What do you mean?" I said, "If you thought of it at three o'clock in the morning, you would have called me then." (Laughter) Then he said, "That's not so. I know people say I do that, but that's not right. I don't wake people up in the middle of the night."

M: Are there any ideas that we haven't talked about that you think are important with your contact with Mr. Johnson? I don't want to cut you off. You have been quite patient and helpful, I think. Are you doing some writing of your own? I noticed your papers around. Are you preparing something?

W: No, I continue to do writing on current matters, but I'm not preparing any documentation of any kind.

This is interesting. I just saw this press conference turn up with Chalmers Roberts saying that--this is September 21, 1966 at a party at Monroney's in which the President said to a group, "I have more regard and respect for Russ Wiggins than for anyone except my father. The editorial page of the Washington Post is great. They print some propaganda on page one, especially in the last year." That was 1966. I was astonished to read that. My relationships with him--some people say that's cronyism. I've never been to the White House except on a formal occasion or at a requested interview.

M: But that kind of exaggeration there is the kind of thing that would lead some kinds of people to say, "Oh, you know you can't trust him. He's not telling the truth."

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W: Oh, I suppose so.

M: Are those papers ones that you might have duplicated to send to the Johnson Library under any circumstances? I'm sure they would be very happy to have anything that you could contribute.

W: Well, there are not as many here as you'd think. There are not very many. I must say at one period in my career I was pretty careful about--I got pretty sloppy as time went on. Haven't kept everything I should have.

M: They are assembling a rather impressive collection down there.

W: It must be an incredible job. I see that Okamoto is working on it. He is a very interesting man.

M: How many pictures they had is just fantastic!

S: A nice man and an absolutely astonishing photographer.

M: Well, you have been quite helpful, as I say. I want to give a hearty thanks to you.

W: What are you going to do? Are you trying to catch a plane back?

M: No, I have to go find accommodations in Bangor, I suppose. The plane is. . .

W: What I am looking for, I can't seem to put my hands on. It was one in which he talked about the possibility of, you know, bombing Ho Chi Minh into submission. Even in a very early date he exhibited a grave skepticism about the possibility of achieving military victory. So many people seem to think that Johnson from the beginning thought he was going to get a military victory out of this. This interview particularly I asked him some questions and I told him

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I had them written down. I said, "You get me off the track so often, I write them down." So later he referred to this to Chalmers Roberts and said, "Your boss is in here with his laundry list."

M: You know, I think Chalmers Roberts told me that story, as a matter of fact, about this laundry list business.

W: I said, "Do you see any prospects of a negotiated settlement?" And he said, "No."

M: This was in 1967 then?

W: "Not since Ho's letter to the Pope has there been much of a chance. I believe that Hanoi turned down Kosygin after talking with Peking and Peking is in control at this point." He said he thought Ho was counting on the fact that he, President Johnson, would be defeated in 1968 and that Kennedy or a Republican would be elected and either one of them would be easier to deal with and they could wait. So they didn't look for any early success in negotiations and if Johnson were re-elected, they could still wait even longer. Their analysis is that the President was losing support in the country and couldn't carry on the war even if he weren't defeated, so he didn't see any reason why they should negotiate. That's turned out to be quite right.

"Do you think there is any reasonable expectation that gradually increasing the pressure will either break their will or destroy the ability of North Vietnam and end the war, with or without negotiations?"

Answer: "No, I believe Ho is the hardest communist leader living and he would die in his bunker like Hitler before he would give up. He

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will continue as long as he can and he can continue as long as the Soviet Union and China continue to supply him."

M: That's a pretty realistic estimate. Doesn't sound like someone who wants a. . .

W: "What added means of applying pressure do you know of?" He said, "Well, the War Department has fifty targets, only fifteen are really important. Haiphong Harbor first, also 20 per cent of the electric plants are still running. Not many high priority targets left. Cannot go much further. You can keep on returning to the old ones and put more power on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But not many ways of applying additional pressure."

M: Doesn't sound like a man who thinks you can just turn up the military effort and--

W: "What are the alternative strategies?" Well, we've got three separate proposals ranging from: A, to go all out, B, to continue what we are doing and C, to take up defensive posture in the south and stop the bombing in the north." His advisors, most are for B which is to continue what you are doing and very few are for C which is to take up defensive positions and stop the bombing. The barrier, the McNamara barrier, at the Seventeenth Parallel had been studied out and rejected. The President said it would take five hundred thousand to a million men. But it's under study, not being given every advance kind of check points and warning and what not.

"What is the possibility of a much sharper emphasis on taking

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and holding instead of seeking and destroying?" "We're trying to do that more and more. That's what the pacification program's all about, but there are manpower limits. So far as manpower is concerned, we've had our vacation and [are] now having good time at loss of pay, no easy way out on this. More either in the DMZ or in the south will mean reserves on the guard or some new additional manpower."

Talking about Haiphong, he said he felt that the Russians would react the way a Texan would react if we dropped a bomb down the funnel of a Soviet ship. It would really put it to them, really be up to them to act. He's not for it, doesn't believe closing would be decisive. They'd only use a land route, be more dependent on China. No one's for it: not Rusk, not McNamara, not Rostow, no one.

Then he had a long resume of all the peace feelers program, said he offered to talk about Ho's four points and our fourteen points, agreed to halt the bombing if they would halt infiltration and, last, finally suggested that in addition if there was anything in the world they would like to talk about he would talk about that. Gromyko wanted to be convinced that we had no aim to keep permanent bases there, and we had come out with a firm statement at Guam on that. He had agreed that the statement we would get out six months after the termination of violence. More talk about the mistake of suspending bombing.

M: He thought that had been a mistake?

W: He said Ne Win had told him that this was a mistake. "Believed should not stop and should not keep making peace offers," that's

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what Ne Win believed. "Thought these gestures convinced Oriental people that we were unsettled and nervous."

M: That's interesting in the line of Burma's policy, I mean Ne Win's Burma. Burma's policy was not exactly supporting us wildly at that time. Doesn't sound like a man who's--

W: "Bombing stops would free men from repair and maintenance. We're keeping five hundred thousand men at work and we'd be fighting many of them if they weren't tied down. Five aircraft are keeping five hundred thousand men tied up. Think bombing is hurting us more and more but it won't break their will or ability to make war as long as the Soviet Union and China help. No faith in the Enclave theory, can bring up mortars and drive us out. Indication that a major strike is being prepared for twenty days from now." That was on May 10.

M: My recall dates even on Vietnam are not quite that good. I don't know whether there was a--I believe there was a strike.

W: Very interesting, he said, "Not all international differences are negotiable. Ho wants South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and probably Thailand. And we don't wish to give them to him and we don't wish to let him have them. It is as simple as that. That's his dream and he wouldn't give up until he has to. We are committed to stopping aggression, set up SEATO to do it. Fulbright explained that treaty and Mansfield signed it. Now I have to administer it and they are no longer for it. Don't believe any method or

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or attack would win over senators who are doves. Senators have to maintain their social standing. We are sharing their independence."

Birch Bayh came in and he gave him a hard time on [Rutherford] Poats. Do you remember the Poats story?

M: Right, I sure do. I interviewed both those people, as a matter of fact.

W: Buttered him and blistered him alternatively. He read a succession of cables from [Ellsworth] Bunker. He was very high on Bunker.

M: That whole thing is a copy of that interview. I wish you'd reproduce that; either let it be attached to this maybe when it comes back to you. Would you do that? Because I think that kind of documentary addition which is not in the White House papers would be of substantial value to add to this.

W: His [President Johnson's] object was to save South Vietnam without getting us into World War III and this was his constant study. General Greene is one who is convinced that we could smash the NVN [North Vietnam] into submission and he may be right but we might get a war, too. Many say the build up should have been faster and we should have let the world know we were doing it, but if we had we might have had a war. We carefully felt our way like feeling a girl's knee until she gets used to it. (Laughter). What we've been trying to do is not get slapped. Few people two years ago thought we could have done what we have done without getting a third World War, but we don't want to push our luck. We are fighting for limited objectives. We can't do everything the

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generals want to do, but we don't want to get them off the team either. We haven't had any MacArthurs this time."

M: We are running off the end of this tape, too, Mr. Wiggins.

W: Okay.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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