INTERVIEWEE: Mayor Samuel Yorty

INTERVIEWER: Joe B. Frantz

DATE: February 7, 1970

F: This is an interview with the Honorable Sam Yorty, mayor of Los Angeles, in his office on Saturday morning, February 7, 1970. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

Mr. Mayor, let's talk at the beginning about just strictly politics. You of course are a long-time Californian, and as you know, California was crucial in '60 to the ambitions of Lyndon Johnson, and again in '64, and I think in '68 also, so you have those quadrennial periods. To begin, when did you first meet Lyndon Johnson? When did you first come to know him?

Y: As best as I can recall, I first met him when I was a member of the United States Congress. That was between 1950 and 1954. Of course Sam Rayburn of Texas took quite a liking to me, and it was mutual, so my feeling for Lyndon Johnson really grew out of my great affection for Sam Rayburn.

F: Did you get together with him some after hours?

Y: Not much then. He was over in the Senate and I was at the House. But I was quite friendly with the Texas delegation, used to many times at lunch, I'd be the only outsider sitting with Sam at the Texas table in our private congressional dining room.

F: When you came on back to California, did you stay in touch?

Y: After I was defeated for the Senate, I kept in some touch but really not very much.

F: So you don't pick him up then really significantly until 1960?

Y: 1960, that's right.

F: What was your role in the preconvention workings at that time?

Y: I was not a member of the California delegation to the national convention due to our usual infighting out here.

F: It was a mixed delegation.

Y: That's right. But I was for Johnson and I wrote to all the members of the delegation and tried to get support for him. Then, of course, since the convention was here I went up and saw him, saw Sam Rayburn.

F: Did you get any declaration out of Senator Johnson that he really was going to be a candidate before that last minute go-ahead?

Y: I don't remember about that, but certainly the people around him were already at work and doing such organizing as they could. He acted like a fellow who, in my opinion, wanted badly to be the candidate but didn't want to admit it in case he'd be deficient--I mean for the nomination. I worked out of a room right down the hall from his suite in the Biltmore. Oscar Chapman and May Oliver (?), I believe it was, we all were using this room, but mainly Chapman and I were using it.

F: Did you have the feeling that you had started late?

Y: Yes. And the Kennedy operation was so well financed and so well organized that it really just developed more like a steam roller, that Johnson with all of his political experience was unequipped to cope with.

F: It was more or less foregone then that Johnson didn't have a chance unless you got past the first ballot, I presume?

Y: That's the way it looked, yes. Of course maybe if he had started out sooner and hadn't acted so reluctant he would have had a better chance.

F: Were you surprised when he was tendered the vice presidential nomination?

Y: I wasn't exactly surprised, no, because that's a normal procedure, to get the strongest person you can, and I think it was pretty obvious to the

Kennedy advisers that Kennedy would not be elected unless he had Johnson on the ticket with him, or someone like Johnson, and there just wasn't anybody else in that position.

F: Some members of the California delegation, not all of them by a long shot, but some members of them were highly incensed that Johnson had been put on the ticket. Did you have any relationships in quieting them?

Y: I was against his going on the ticket. He called a little group of us in, and at first I think I talked with him about it and that I hoped he wouldn't do it.

F: Was this before he had accepted or after?

Y: Before first. I was one of those who was not for it. We were told it had been offered.

F: Why weren't you for it?

Y: I just didn't feel that he should be second on the ticket with Kennedy, I just didn't like the looks of the whole situation at the time. Then he called us in, maybe twenty people, in this suite and said that he had this offer and that he wanted to let us know before the press knew it because we were his good friends. So to the few of us there he explained that he had had this offer, and that he felt that in the interest of the Democratic party that he should accept it, and he just wanted us to know that before it was announced to the public.

F: He wasn't really asking for a vote to go ahead or not to go ahead, but just really informational?

Y: At that point he said he hoped we'd understand his decision, yes.

F: What did you do then during the campaign?

Y: During the campaign I was for Nixon. Part of my reason was that I felt that the Democratic party had turned down the more logical candidate;

another reason, which I wrote out, is that Nixon was a Californian.

F: Did this make any difference in your relationship with what became Vice President Johnson?

Y: Perhaps, I don't know, because I didn't see that much of him.

F: But you weren't really associated with him then in the campaign either pro or con; that is, you neither confronted nor cooperated during the campaign?

Y: No, I was for Nixon.

F: When you offered yourself as Mayor of Los Angeles, did Mr. Johnson give you any encouragement or take any notice of it one way or another?

Y: So far as I know he had no involvement at all. I don't remember. It's possible, because some of his good friends and supporters were for me, but I don't think he took any part.

F: By '64 had you and Mr. Johnson talked about his possibility then in the campaign of that year?

Y: Frankly, I can't remember when I talked to him then, but of course I was cochairman of the Citizens for Johnson here in the '64 campaign. I saw him here, of course, when he came.

F: Anything unusual about his coming here, or memorable?

Y: No, except that he seemed to be so very happy about being President and loving to get out with the people and leaving his Secret Service men and shaking hands. He didn't have to say very much of a learned nature because Goldwater was ahead of his time. He told the truth about the war but he was ahead of his time. They made Goldwater out to be kind of a rash warmonger, so really all Johnson had to do was just kind of coast along and be nice to people, and that was by and large what he did when

he was here.

F: You in a sense were host to him and to President Lopez Mateos of Mexico in the early part of '64. Did you take part in any of the arrangements to bring the two men together here?

Y: Our city of course cooperated. Through the police department we provided security and the place any everything. The idea of meeting here was not mine; I don't know who decided that, but it was a very good decision.

F: Do you want to tell about that day?

Y: There wasn't anything really special about it. There was great cordiality between the two Presidents. Of course I had met Lopez Mateos before and regarded him as a friend of mine, so I had two friends meeting here. One of the strange things that happened though, a little aside, was that when I went to leave the arena by a sort of private way that we all went out, a Secret Service man ran along side my car and knocked on the window and said: "Would you mind if the Secretary of State rides with you?" They had driven off and left the Secretary of State standing. So because the President was there the Secretary of State didn't get the attention he would have if he were by himself.

Anyway, we all went out and got in the helicopters. I went in the helicopter too, but I can't remember where we went or why we were using them--flew around some place, maybe just to see the Presidents off. Oh, yes, I remember. It was at the airport because Lopez Mateos--when I saw him off---was so very gracious.

F: By and large the whole day just went very smoothly in its schedule?

Y: It was very good, yes, as far as I know. Everything went fine.

F: By the time '68 comes around, of course, Mr. Johnson has Viet Nam on his

own back, as well as all the other gatherings of the 60's. Did you give him any advice prior to March 31, '68 on whether he should offer himself again, how he would stand in California?

Y: I assumed that he was going to run again. He certainly acted like it because as the time approached, there was one period there when they were calling me before they would make appointments out here and asking me if I approved of them. He was having difficulty at that time with Unruh, as I recall, and he never did like Governor Brown, although he pretended to, and treated Brown with public cordiality but privately he had very little respect for him. He didn't like Unruh. So while he went through the motions with them, they did call me and we were good friends, and they were clearing appointments and whatnot.

But mainly, historically the interesting relationship I had with him with trying to present the views of our top military people in the Pacific to the President directly so as to get out around McNamara.

F: How did you get in this role?

Y: Mainly because I went to Viet Nam and I studied the situation, talked to all our military people. I have a long history in foreign affairs, having advocated the declaration of war on Hitler in 1940 and predicted we'd be in the war and we should get ready, so I have a long background in it.

F: When both candidates were going around saying "We're not going to send any of our boys to war"?

Y: That's right. "Our boys will never again fight on foreign soil," both

of them were saying. I was at that time on the board of directors of Bill Bullitt's "Fight for Freedom," on the national board, and on the national board of the William L. White Committee, which was the committee to defend America, "Aiding the Allies." So this is a long-time interest.

I went to the President and urged him to show courage and strength, and told him that every time he did his rating went up in the polls; that the American people are courageous, they want courage, they're frustrated by seeing us unable to beat a little six-rate power. I told him that I thought he should communicate more with General Eisenhower, who had told me, he said, "Tell your friend Johnson that he can call me any time on foreign policy and I'll be glad to help him, but I don't want to talk to him about domestic policy because we're 180° apart." I carried this message to Johnson, too.

F: You get the feeling that there was basic cordiality between the two men, President Eisenhower and President Johnson?

Y: I think so, yes, because Johnson had been very fair with Eisenhower when Eisenhower was President. And Eisenhower told me to tell him, "Tell your friend Johnson to call me any time on foreign policy," but didn't want to talk to him on domestic policy.

I delivered that message and the President did follow through too, I noted later that he forgot nothing, he came out and saw Eisenhower or something like that, and started a little closer relationship. I believe he had been neglecting the opportunity to have a former President back him up.

F: How did you communicate with President Johnson--by letter, telephone, in person?

Y: By letter, but the only really meaningful communications were in person. What I would do, I would simply notify his staff when I would be in Washington and then I wouldn't call any more, I'd wait until they called me. I did that because I know how terribly busy a President is, and it's almost unfair--

F: You know how busy a mayor is!

Y: That's right. It's almost unfair to ask the President for an appointment unless there's something really very urgent, so I waited until he'd wanted to see me. But I would always get a call, whether he had time to see me or not, and they would ask me: "Is there anything you need to talk with him about?" and if there wasn't-- Maybe on every occasion I didn't see him, but almost always he would call me and have me slip in after his appointments for the day so we could relax.

F: They were always off-the-record appointments?

Y: That's right, although once in awhile I'd run into the press and they'd find out, but many times they didn't know I was there at all. I always tried to avoid them because I didn't want to talk about what I'd talked to the President about.

I urged him to allow the military to knock out the port of Haiphong. He said to me on one occasion, "I've released about 159 of 200 targets," these figures may not be exact. But I said, "Yes, but you haven't released the most important ones."

On one occasion when the command in Viet Nam had set up an operation to mine the rivers around Hanoi, they got all set to go and weather came

in for about five days. Then when they went to fly the mission they got a stand-down, and they didn't know why. When I was talking to Johnson, I said to him, "Mr. President, they wanted to mine those rivers around Hanoi. You gave them a stand-down and I don't understand this; I think it's very wrong." That's the only time he acted a little irritated, because he was always very cordial with me.

F: He took your advice, as far as listening--

Y: He didn't follow it but he took it because he'd question me. He said, "Look, Sam, I've got an envoy in there talking to Ho Chi Minh; he has been in there about five days. You're trying to get me to bomb within a hundred feet of my own envoy." I said, "Well, Mr. President, I didn't know you had an envoy in there." So I very carefully verbally let this be known to Admiral Sharp through the Marine Corps general who happened to be in Los Angeles. I went up to his suite and told him very privately that's why the stand-down. He said, "Well, I don't think the Admiral knows it, and this isn't right." But I believe that was the period when the Communists were building up for the big TET offensive, and I suppose, I'm guessing that what really happened is they let the envoy in so that the bombing would be called off and the harassment called off so they could slip the supplies through for the TET offensive. I think they took advantage of Johnson.

F: Did he tell you who the envoy was?

Y: No, I didn't ask him. But later it did come out. Some Congressman brought out the fact.

F: And evidently the military didn't know it at the time.

Y: I don't know whether the Joint Chiefs did or not, but the Commander-in-Chief

in the Pacific didn't know it and he should have known it. I never did tell anybody, I kept the secret, but later some Congressman talked about it. But I don't think it was a sincere effort by the Communists at all. I think they just wanted TET supplies, so once again they took advantage of a man of good will. They fooled him.

F: Did you make any sort of private poll yourself on how he would do in California in '68?

Y: No. I want to tell you one more thing that I think might be of some significance. I told him that he had no right to send American boys out to Viet Nam to fight under these restrictions. I said, "No President has that right. If you're sending them out there and you're asking them to risk their lives, we have an obligation to back them up. This country has got to back them up. But when people tell you don't escalate, what they're saying is 'Let the boys risk their lives, but let's don't do anything to risk ours.' I think that's cowardly. I think you should change it and take some of these restrictions off and win this war, wind it up."

I always got the impression he was agreeing with me, but then I guess the next person in would change his mind. But the dominating factor in his thinking was fear of the Russians, and he never could overcome it. He practically admits it now in his statements. He said that he didn't want a declaration of war on North Viet Nam because he was afraid they'd have a treaty with Russia.

When I asked him about Haiphong, he said, "Well, suppose we bomb a Russian ship?" This was just one of the times I talked about Haiphong. He said, "Suppose we bomb a Russian ship?" I said to him, "Well, you

don't even have to bomb; Admiral Sharp, your commander-in-chief in the Pacific, has said that bombing wouldn't be necessary, that in World War II they put the port out of commission by sinking an old tub in it and the Japanese couldn't use it for two years." I said, "You could do that." And he said, "Yes, but Admiral Sharp said also that it's a political decision." And I said, "Yes, Mr. President, but if he hadn't said that he wouldn't be an admiral anymore. He had to say that, but he recommended openly that we close that port."

Later I talked to Admiral Sharp about this, and Admiral Sharp said that he said to him, "I don't want another Battleship Maine." So fear of the Russians dominated his thinking and frustrated the United States' effort to end the war.

F: Did you get the feeling that the military leadership was frustrated by his moderation?

Y: They were frustrated by his fear of the Russians and his unwillingness to let them do the decisive things that needed to be done, knock out the targets that needed to be knocked out--the really important ones--and frustrated by his unwillingness to let them use the normal tactics and strategy of warfare. They were completely hemmed in. He was listening too much to McNamara.

F: You gave him strong support when some of the other people were backing off. Did he seem to appreciate it?

Y: Yes, he did. There was another little episode that's very interesting, and that is, I read Marguerite Higgins' book, Viet Nam Nightmare, and was pretty shocked to find out that President Johnson was against the overthrow of President Diem when President Kennedy allegedly made a

decision during a shower, a shower bath, they called him and told him they wanted to withdraw the security guard for Diem which meant the end of Diem, of course--a signal to the Vietnamese military that they'd have to get rid of him. I marked the book and told President Johnson, "You know, I was against the overthrow of Diem at the time, and said so, but I didn't know you were." He said, "Yes." So I said, "Marguerite Higgins has this book here and I've marked it for you, where she states your position." He said, "Oh, thank you."

Evidently McNamara was at the time, too, but what they had done was, they had just called him and said, "The chief said this is what we want done," so there was no more argument.

In the meantime Hillsman and the engineers of that overthrow of Diem had been fired by Johnson, so this sort of fits in with the theory.

F: I would presume neither Johnson nor McNamara was really consulted on this decision to overthrow Diem?

Y: Johnson, according to Marguerite Higgins, had said that he was against it because it would cause confusion and prolong the war. Of course he had been out in the Pacific and called Diem the "George Washington of Viet Nam" or something. I think he was consulted, though, but mainly it was too late. Hillsman and others had evidently engineered it and did it cleverly by first getting Kennedy and then telling the rest the decision had been made.

But I saw the President later. He was flying in here from Honolulu where he had been out on military consultations--

F: You're talking about President Johnson now?

Y: Johnson. I went out to see him and I said, "Mr. President, did you have time to read that book," and he said, "I certainly did. That's very interesting."

Now a Marine Corps general,I've got to think of his name because he is very well known--

F: Not Walt?

Y: No, no one in the Pacific, he was of all the Marines. He had told me that everything Marguerite Higgins said in there about his position at the time, because he was one of the first in Viet Nam, was absolutely correct. So evidently she got her story pretty straight.

I finally at one point made a public speech in which I said that if Goldwater had been elected the war would be over. I never heard from Johnson after that.

F: I good way to get the silent treatment.

When Watts broke out with its--

Y: By the way, I might add this: that every time I talked to him, the subject of Bobby Kennedy came up. I think myself that if Johnson had been elected on his own, that he would have been a great President. I think he has done some great things, and I think he had great desire, great heart. But coming in as he did with Bobby Kennedy continually sniping at him and setting up a government in exile, this was constantly on his mind. He knew he could trust me because he knew I was not an ally of Bobby's, and we always talked about it. There was no question that it rankled him and made it difficult for him. This played on his mind constantly, and perhaps was a factor that really in some ways ruined his administration.

F: In California, in one sense during this period, you've got three Democratic parties with Governor Brown and you and the Unruh faction, and Unruh embracing Bobby Kennedy rather early in the situation.

Y: Unruh told me at first that he was really not for Kennedy and that he'd written to Johnson and criticized the Kennedys, but Johnson gave him no recognition, and so just out of spite he decided to go with the Kennedys; and probably some other factors too, including the fact that they had a lot of money to back the people who were in league with them. And then of course Unruh eventually saw a chance, with the Kennedy backing and their organization, to head a delegation to the national convention, which he did. I think though by then Johnson may have been out, I don't remember now the sequence of events.

F: Did you and Governor Brown during this period ever try to collaborate to head off Unruh and the Kennedy faction?

Y: No, I had no collaboration with Brown.

F: You each one then were working with your own group?

Y: I was here as a nonpartisan office, so I had very little to do with partisan politics. My cochairmanship of the Citizens for Johnson in '64 was a nonpartisan effort of Republicans and Democrats.

F: Who was your other cochairman?

Y: The person who was the hardest to get was Mark Taper (?) who became the treasurer.

F: It wasn't Ed Pauley?

Y: Could be, I don't remember. Ed was a very strong supporter of Johnson's. I think my cochairman was a Republican, but I don't remember who it was.

F: You had this problem of Watts of course in mid-August. I'd be very interested in what the White House role was in this. We're pretty well on record as to all that you did to cool the thing and to sort of rehabilitate the section.

Y: We were the first ones to experience this, and it's my opinion it was caused by television, people watching what was going on in the South, where they were putting the cameras on Bull Connors and all this other thing, and it got the Negro people all upset and tense. I think it just took a spark then to set it off.

But I don't recall that we had too much except the usual relationship with the White House, the emergency services and whatnot. They were very cooperative.

F: Whatever you sought from them you pretty well got, I gather?

Y: Yes, they were very cooperative.

F: What about when you move into the various social programs like housing and education, urban renewal and anti-poverty and so on?

Y: I think due to the fact that the Johnson Administration was so badly infiltrated by people who were really for Bobby Kennedy and not for Johnson, we experienced great difficulty. One of Johnson's good friends in the White House, who was also a good friend of mine, told me that she went down to work in the stenographic pool one time and something came in about me. They said, "Oh, we're not for him. He's not our friend." She said, "I'm very sorry, you're wrong. He's a good friend of President Johnson's." So this was the Kennedy group left in there.

Sargent Shriver, as head of the OEO--some people were contending of course that the riot was because we didn't cooperate in the poverty program, which he pointed out, that we had more money than most anybody else here but an effort was made to make it appear that Cavanagh had been very effective with federal money in Detroit, and that's why they were having no riot, and that Lindsay--

F: That held up for awhile, and then got shot to pieces.

Y: Yes, but that was the effort that the left wing made, to make it appear that it was my fault and that we hadn't cooperated with the poverty program. But at least Shriver did say that we have a lot of poverty programs and a lot of money here. But later when Shirver started this--

F: Could you work with Shriver?

Y: Well, I don't know. Later he came out with this guideline that had to be a maximum feasible participation of the poor, practically that they should run the program, and I didn't think that was right. Other mayors, we'd had trouble with it. He'd approve a plan like in Pittsburgh that he wouldn't approve out here, and it caused a lot of trouble. Eventually it caused so much trouble that a group of mayors, practically all of us, had a meeting with Vice President Humphrey because we were simply getting disgusted. Shriver was causing us to be beaten over the head by too many verbal promises and whatnot, and then when the people didn't get them they'd blame the mayors.

F: Did you get the feeling that Shriver was working in a sense for Bobby Kennedy or that he was working for Shriver or for Johnson?

Y: I couldn't tell so I went to the President. I said, "Do you trust Sargent Shriver?" He said, "I don't know, what do you think?" I said, "I don't think he's helping you any."

So here, again, he's got the head of the poverty organization, doesn't know if he can trust him but leaves him there because of Bobby Kennedy. All through this administration there runs this theme of always worrying about Bobby Kennedy and his operations. And this is why I say I think it many ways it has completely frustrated the Johnson Administratio

F: You think in many ways it kind of neutralized him at times, that is, kept him from taking certain actions that he might have otherwise?

Y: It kept him from ever feeling that he was comfortably in the driver's seat with the backing of his party.

F: In general, did you find the social programs during the Johnson Administration to be helpful to your city, or do you think he is guilty of promising more than he could deliver?

Y: I think there were too many promises, but I think the man recognized poverty and wanted to do something about it more than any President before him that I can think of. He certainly leaned over backwards to prove that he wasn't a Southerner, a traditional type in race relations. I think he was a man of good will. I think he loved public affection, public esteem, and I think was very disappointed at the way the public treated him, the way the press treated him toward the end.

F: On thing that always interested him was water problems in Los Angeles. Southern California has its share of water problems. Did you two ever get together on those?

Y: Not personally and direct. I don't remember any. I took up lots of problems with him by mail. The things that stand out to me are my verbal talks with him, and some of them went on for a very long time. Once, I think it was well over an hour. That was the night they were having the Women's Press Club in Washington and there was speculation of whether or not he would go. We had this long talk at the end of the day, and finally he said to me, "Go on, get over and get on your black tie, and get over there." So I said, "Are you coming, Mr. President?" He said, "Well, I may." So I knew he was coming. The minute I got there I saw the Secret Service men. He dropped in.

F: By and large did his staff work well with you when you requested an audience with him? I mean, when you said you were going to be there, did they pretty well buck the thing up, you felt, and you got good attention?

Y: Some of them would. I don't remember now who we'd contact, but we contacted Johnson people because there were a lot of non-Johnson people in that White House.

F: You didn't find any great difference though, say--of course, you had Walter Jenkins at the beginning.

Y: Yes, Walter was a very good contact. As a matter of fact I could get Walter Jenkins--I'd call here like at 5 or 8 o'clock, he'd always be in the White House. He was a very hard worker. Then after that--

F: Of course Bill Moyers rose after a while.

Y: Bill Moyers, I had very little to do with.

F: Califano?

Y: Califano, some, but mainly the steel fellow from Texas.

F: Oh, Marvin Watson.

Y: Watson. He was the one that we started contacting.

F: And you found you could work with Marvin?

Y: I always could work with the Johnson people, who were really Johnson people. But some of the others, we lacked trust between each other.

F: Did you have more than just a casual conversation with the President on the pollution problem? Air pollution particularly is something that we didn't become too conscious of until the '60's.

Y: Of course it was a big problem here. It wasn't something that I would take up with him because at the time the state was the one that had the power to regulate the emissions from automobiles and was not

doing it, so that was a more of a state matter. Now it's federal.

F: Did the aerospace industry in California improve its position while Johnson was in the White House? Do you feel that California got a fair shake out of contracts etc.?

Y: I felt he maintained the competitive system, but favored Texas, as Kennedy had favored Massachusetts. The great NASA establishment went up there, and of course the Kennedys were very frank about it--they just said, "We can do more for Massachusetts." And of course Houston got the space flight center and the big 111 contracts, so I felt that he favored Texas, but you expect that.

F: Do you think there's anything else that we ought to cover here?

Y: I think that's all the time I can spend now.

F: All right. I thank you, Mr. Mayor.

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By Samuel Yorty

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D. If you wish to retain the literary property rights to the material for a period of time, the phrase in paragraph 1 "and all literary property rights" will be deleted and either of the following paragraphs (appropriately numbered) added to the end of the statement:

> The donor retains to himself for a period of _____ years all literary property rights in the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of the instrument. After the expiration of this _____ year period, the aforesaid literary property rights will pass to the United States of America.
>
> or
>
> The donor retains to himself during his lifetime all literary property rights in the material donated to the United States of America by the terms of this instrument. After the death of the donor, the aforesaid literary property rights will pass to the United States of America.