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LAWRENCE F. O'BRIEN ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW XV

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Signed by Lawrence F. O'Brien on April 5, 1990.

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ACCESSION NUMBER 92-26

INTERVIEW XV

DATE: November 20, 1986

INTERVIEWEE: LAWRENCE F. O'BRIEN

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. O'Brien's office, New York City

Tape 1 of 3, Side 1

G: Some general items early in your tenure [as postmaster general]: first, one question regarding your swearing-in. There seems to have been some question as to whether to hold that swearing-in at Hye, [Texas], at the general store post office, or whether to do it at the [LBJ] Ranch. There was initially some plan to do it at the Ranch. Any recollection of that?

O: No, other than I was taken totally by surprise. I am sure I had no idea regarding the location of the swearing-in or the format until we were in the process of heading toward Hye. So that would indicate that that was very much a last-minute decision which intrigued the President.

G: I have a note that he took the press on a four-and-a-half [hour] tour of his various ranches during that trip. Were you along, do you recall?

O: No, I wasn't.

G: You seem to have maintained a policy of silence on the [William] Manchester book [***Death of a President***], which came out during this period. Any recollections of that?

O: My recollection is pretty much limited to not making any public comment, I guess, but being disturbed with the book. My disturbance probably went to what were inaccurate comments in the book of one sort or another, all of which elude me now. I recall that Ken O'Donnell was very much disturbed about it and apparently his views were made known to Manchester, I don't recall in what form. But I did see, not long ago, a letter from Manchester to me on some occasion in which he said that he had wished Ken O'Donnell had refrained from comments that he made regarding the book before it actually was published. I think overridingly my recollection is that Jackie was very much upset by Manchester's approach to a book--

G: But I thought she had authorized it.

O: It became very confusing. If she had authorized it, then something went awry as it progressed. But my attitude toward Manchester and the book was confined pretty much to my own personal reactions and I didn't have the occasion or inclination to discuss the book publicly.

G: Did the book's publication exacerbate tensions between the Kennedy people and the Johnson people, would you say?

O: I don't recall the book specifically in that regard. I'm trying to determine the time frame of the book. When was the book published?

G: I'll have to get the date on it. It was sometime before your appointment, I assume, wasn't it?

O: I would assume.

G: In November you had O'Brien Day in Springfield, [Massachusetts], and [Hubert] Humphrey came and spoke, and you were--

O: That was November of 1965.

G: 1965.

O: Right.

G: Any recollections of that event?

O: Oh, I have a--

G: Cathedral High.

O: I have vivid recollections. It really warmed my heart. It was fun. I remember arriving at Bradley Field, the Springfield-Hartford airport, and there were signs and banners and the Cathedral High School band. I went to my high school and addressed the student body informally, and we had a lot of fun. Then in the business section of the city, all the store windows were set up with O'Brien-type displays and posters. I remember a blackout that night prior to the dinner, or the night before the dinner, I guess, and it was an extensive blackout through the Northeast.

G: Throughout New England, wasn't it?

O: Yes. So for a period of a number of hours it looked like the O'Brien ceremonies would terminate abruptly.

But then they had this dinner. The people that put this together did an unbelievable job. I forget how many thousands there were at the dinner.

G: Three thousand or so?

O: Yes, it was the largest ever seen there. And Hubert was at the dinner at his own request, because when I was asked who should be invited from Washington, I asked them not to invite people from Washington. I felt I didn't want people feeling compelled in any sense to go to my dinner in Springfield, Massachusetts. But Hubert learned about it and spoke to me. In his inimitable style [he] said, "Why don't you include me? I thought I was your friend." (Laughter) And he said, "I'm coming, whether you invite me or not." And he did.

It was a really great evening. We had John McCormack there, who didn't travel very much. I didn't know until toward the close that McCormack's wife was in the car in the parking lot. She didn't attend functions, but she had traveled with him from Boston over the road. We had any number of people, including the Republican governor of Massachusetts, John Volpe. It went well, highlighted by a show. The stage [was] so far away it was hard to see from the head table. But I remember there were some dancers, and Hubert turned to me and said, "Gee, they're good. Look at them." And Muriel [Humphrey] said, "Yes. They're great." And all of a sudden they disappeared. We heard some noise, and the stage had caved in. (Laughter) And Hubert thought it was part of the act and I did, too. We didn't realize that the stage had fallen. It was kind of a crazy night.

They had some profit, whatever thousands of dollars it was, and I decided that we [should] split it between my high school and Western New England College and set up a scholarship-type fund in the name of my father and mother, and that exists to this day. They give an award each year to one high school student and one Western New England student in memory of my parents. I think it was such a contrast to dinners that you're accustomed to. It was coming home and I enjoyed it thoroughly.

G: There was a lot of speculation at this time that you would run for the Senate--

O: Yes.

G: --and apparently a lot of people [were] urging you to run. This was before [Endicott] Peabody got into the race, and there was a feeling that maybe [John F.] Collins couldn't beat [Edward] Brooke. Was that the--?

O: Yes, that was the substance of it. There were suggestions made, and I think probably even polls were taken. I guess I may have mentioned it before, but in this context Arthur Goldberg urged me to run for the Senate in Massachusetts, moments before I was being named as postmaster general by the President at the Ranch.

I can't say that I gave it a great deal of thought. I suppose it was a little intriguing. But I never had any great confidence in my ability to be elected to office. I felt I could work on behalf of others and felt comfortable doing it. I never was a fund-raiser, even in behalf of others. I always found that repugnant, and all I could envision was running for the Senate and seeking funding and I never felt that I would be very good at it. So I can't say that it was a great personal decision on my part, and I wouldn't want to exaggerate the

number of people or the extent of the persuasion. It was impressive to me in a lot of ways, but I never really reached a point where you would say, "What is he going to do in the next forty-eight hours?"

G: Collins, I believe, did come down to Washington and met with you sometime.

O: Yes, I do recall a conversation. I believe also that McCormack was involved in some way. But I don't remember the details.

G: Collins reportedly wanted you to issue a statement that you would not run, and your statement was somewhat qualified, I think, that you're not planning to run, or not a candidate at this time--

O: Yes.

G: --which was not exactly what he wanted to hear.

O: No, and you do jog my recollection, because at that time when Collins asked me to make a statement, it was probably close to the height of the discussions that were taking place and the recommendations I was receiving from friends regarding what I should do. The statement I issued probably had as much to do with not disappointing people who kept urging me to keep thinking about it than [with] my own personal view.

G: Did you feel that Collins would not be able to mount a successful campaign against Brooke or--?

O: I don't know what my thoughts were at that time regarding Collins. I would say that Collins would be a solid candidate on the basis of his background and visibility. The general attitude toward him was quite favorable. Of course, the question would be, would I be a better candidate than Collins? But the fact that Collins was seeking or wanted to seek the Senate seat was not a problem to me at all, nor did I feel that perhaps this should jog me into further consideration because Collins would be inept as a candidate. I don't think that really entered into it.

G: What was Ted Kennedy's role in this? Did he urge you to run?

O: Yes.

G: Did he?

O: Yes. I say urge; I don't want to, decades later, try to directly quote anything that Ted said to me, but he made it clear that he felt I should give it serious thought and that he was approving. I don't think he probably went much beyond that.

G: Would he have helped you, do you think, in that race?

O: I would think that perhaps not, only because traditionally he avoided becoming involved in contests up there. In Ken O'Donnell's run for the governorship that was evidenced. He was not involved with Ken, and Ken was very disappointed in that regard.

G: Was the fact that O'Donnell was at the time running for governor a reason that you didn't have more enthusiasm for this?

O: The bottom line really came to that. I don't want to suggest, and it wasn't the case, that I decided not to run because Ken O'Donnell was running for governor, because my interest was not that great. But, clearly, if I had lulled myself into a decision to be a candidate, I think it would have been a big mistake, because it would have been O'Brien and O'Donnell, who had both left Washington, both seeking high office in Massachusetts. Who did they think they were to come bouncing into the state that way?

From my point of view, it didn't overly concern me because I didn't have that keen an interest in any event, whether O'Donnell was running for governor or not. Clearly, if that were my ambition and I had formulated in my mind a decision to make that drive and commit myself to it, I think I would have been foreclosed by the O'Donnell run. It wouldn't have made any sense. But inasmuch as I never got to that point, I can't say that I would have sought the Senate seat if O'Donnell had not been a candidate for governor. I have to say, though, that, if I really wanted to run and I was committed, I would have had to make a very practical decision that it was rendered impossible, really, by the O'Donnell candidacy.

G: Yes. Did this dilemma affect your relationship with O'Donnell?

O: No, the O'Donnell departure from the White House was a matter that affected the relationship, not between O'Donnell and me, but those on the periphery. There were a few O'Donnell friends who were disturbed that I stayed in the White House, and that caused some friction. I was never directly exposed to it, but it came to my attention. Bobby Kennedy came to me and asked me to join him at a party at Duke Ziebert's for O'Donnell when he was leaving. I went with Bobby to this cocktail party. Then later on, O'Donnell and I met in Boston when I was there for a speaking engagement. We had a long session in my room at the hotel, not in any sense saying that there were misunderstandings, but talking about his campaign. I was a contributor to his campaign. And it was at that session that Ken told me about his inability to elicit support from Teddy Kennedy, which bothered him considerably. But--

G: Did he want you to do more in that race?

O: No, I was in the Johnson cabinet. He didn't ask for anything. I was not directly involved in the campaign and I felt what I was in a position to do was to contribute financially to his campaign, which I did. As the years went on we saw each other occasionally and maintained a warm relationship. We met in New York on occasions at Toots Shor's and

other places; we had lunch and dinner in Washington two or three times over those years. Ken went his own way. He was based in Boston, and I never felt that there was any personal problem between Ken and I, nor do I think he did. I think the only disturbing aspect of it to me was that I did not have the knowledge that Ken was going to run for governor, that that was kept closely held, and I did feel that I should have been advised when he and I and Dave Powers were in the process of resignation. He didn't have to, didn't need to, but it would have been a natural thing to do, and that didn't occur. I think I learned this through a reporter in Boston.

G: Did O'Donnell ever explain why he hadn't told you?

O: No, never got into it. But, you see, if you were thinking ahead yourself--I'm sure I wouldn't have been thinking of running for governor of Massachusetts--you were aware there was an upcoming Senate contest. I think it was that early that Ted Kennedy first broached it to me, at a time when I wasn't aware that O'Donnell was going to go back to Massachusetts and run for governor.

G: There was a press mention of the fact that O'Donnell was not at the head table at your Springfield dinner, and in fact that he arrived late and apparently wasn't even able to get a seat in the hall, it was so packed. Do you recall the reason why he was not--?

O: No, I don't. When was this, November of 1965?

G: Yes.

O: No, I have no idea. I do now recall that he was there. But inasmuch as I didn't do the planning for the dinner, I'm sure of this, he was invited. Why he wasn't at the head table or he arrived late I have no idea. As a matter of fact, O'Donnell attended, at least on one occasion and perhaps twice, functions for me in Springfield while I was commissioner of the NBA.

G: There was also some speculation that you would have accepted a draft from the state convention for that Senate race.

O: Well, I think there probably was speculation, but I don't know who would have been drafting me.

G: Do you think that Peabody's announcement that he was going to run effectively closed the door on your--?

O: Oh, I think the door was closed anyway.

G: Really?

O: Yes, I don't think that probably impacted on it.

G: Because there were all sorts of statements in the press that you were reportedly ready to run if you got a draft, and it was almost as if there was some sort of campaign being advanced--

O: I had friends in Massachusetts urging me to run who were, in turn, probably doing whatever they could to mount some kind of a procedure that would convince me to run. I don't want to gild the lily. I don't want it described as an army of people in Massachusetts that was marching up and down urging Larry O'Brien to run for the Senate. There were a number of people in Massachusetts and in Washington who felt that it was an obvious shot for me. I recall some polls, maybe not then but later. I had a higher visibility in Massachusetts than I envisioned, as I had been away from there for quite a while. But I don't think, frankly, it was a matter of playing coy. It was a matter of appreciating the attitude of people who felt that it was a good idea, being impressed with Teddy's view and perhaps some others. But I don't recall--I'm sure it was the case--that I got to anything close to serious consideration of this.

G: Can you give an assessment of the race as it actually developed between Brooke and Peabody and also an explanation of why Brooke won?

O: I don't remember the race itself, to be honest with you. Brooke had achieved a solid position in Massachusetts. It was rather amazing, with perhaps the population of Massachusetts 2 or 3 per cent black. Brooke was a very attractive, charismatic guy. But I don't remember closely following the campaign.

G: Did LBJ ever talk to you about the Senate race in Massachusetts?

O: I don't recall that he did. It might have happened, but if he did, it had to be some fleeting comment. At that time I had gone through the discussions with the President after his election. I had reached the agreement with him to stay on through that first session and in turn he had named me postmaster general. A lot of things occurred over that year, and if he was aware of this potential candidacy--and he probably was--I don't recall it ever came into discussion.

G: Okay, let's go into some of the issues you faced when you did take over as postmaster. One of your first actions was an announcement that you were committed to the policy of President Kennedy's executive order recognizing the postal unions. Do you remember that?

O: The assistant postmaster general who dealt directly with the postal unions was Dick Murphy, a long-time friend and associate of mine.

G: Let me ask you to talk at length about the postal unions, because this must have been a very significant aspect of the entire Post Office Department.

O: The postal unions were and are extremely well-organized and cognizant of their political clout. My recollection is that there were something like seventeen unions of one sort or another involved in the postal service. The clerks and the carriers, of course, were the predominant unions. Closely following my arrival, we were engaged in negotiations with the unions. I attended some of the sessions. The nitty-gritty aspects were conducted by Murphy and other members of the staff. In these negotiations, which would go on ad infinitum, there would be no real give on the part of the unions. There was no authority, really, in the hands of the postmaster general in the final analysis as a negotiator to resolve issues.

G: Why not? Why couldn't you?

O: The bottom line was they could go to the Hill. You'd play out this charade, and there was not any meaningful give. Ultimately they would be storming the Hill, demanding their pay increase, with a lot of political clout, and they'd get it. So the role of postal management in union relations was not the role you would have in the private sector. It was exasperating because you had a keen desire to work out reasonable agreements with these people, to ensure the continuity of the service. I would be in and out of these negotiations, and Murphy and his people would be involved in them day after day. They could walk away from you after they had gone through this phase, and they would get what they wanted in the final analysis and you could lump it. That was not a very pleasant situation.

G: Had you had dealings with the postal unions during the 1960 campaign?

O: People did, in the campaign. The postal unions, you know, they've been around a long time and they're very potent. The members of Congress listened to them, were concerned about them, worried about their positions with the unions in their home districts. After all, there are seven hundred thousand postal employees and their families with a tradition of political involvement despite federal rules. No member of Congress could ignore the postal unions. This was one lobbying group that was present in every district in the country and they made their presence known.

G: You came into office with a lot of ideas for upgrading the postal service and making it more efficient, more automated.

O: I didn't come into office with those views, but I wasn't there very long when I realized what I had come into. (Laughter) I guess like most people, I never paid a great deal of attention to the postal service. My predecessor at the cabinet meetings would not have much of a voice; nobody from the President on down paid a great deal of attention to the problems of the postal service. You were sort of low man on the totem pole. I didn't really know what I was walking into. But some aspects of it hit early on. Zip code was just coming into being at that time; that was the first evidence of real progress in the postal service for a long time. This had to succeed or there wouldn't be any postal service in due course. (Laughter) The role of the unions in the Post Office Department exceeded the

role of any other federal union by far. The inability of the postal service to progress in terms of mechanization, facilities, and the rest because of budgetary restrictions, had brought about a totally unacceptable situation. You couldn't build a post office; you didn't have the finances. There were some thirty-seven thousand post offices. Obviously, they needed upgrading constantly. It required new buildings, and it was a bonanza for people in the private sector who would acquire a piece of land, go to their local bank for financing on the basis of a commitment from the Post Office Department. It was very costly, but that was the only procedure you had. On the mechanization side, the process was slow in evolvement, almost nonexistent. I was flabbergasted to find that there wasn't an assistant postmaster general level entity in the postal service for research and development.

So there you had it: you had the unions; you had the political overtones; you had the attempt to overcome the basic service problems with zip codes; you had this situation regarding facilities. And you had no observable creative input in research or development. So we created an assistant postmaster general for R & D [research and development], accepted the realities of life regarding the unions. Then [we] organized national advertisers to do public service, selling zip code. Here you are, with a volume of mail equal the volume of the entire rest of the world, growing constantly, a rate structure that was ridiculous--third and fourth-class mail users are being subsidized--and, in addition, the service was inadequate. You found that even some western European countries were ahead of you in terms of service capability. You have to face those responsibilities and determine what you can do about it.

Well, the structure was so enormous, I mean, just the statistics were mind-boggling. (Laughter) As I said, seven hundred thousand-plus employees. That beautiful building at that time was the headquarters of the Post Office Department in Washington. I think the table of organization showed thirty-six hundred, I believe, members on the postmaster general's staff. I forget how many assistant postmasters general and you had the deputy postmaster general, a battery of lawyers, thirty or forty. Not knowing the staff, with rare exceptions inheriting the staff, 99 per cent civil service, I did resort promptly to establishing a little task force of my own, four or five young fellows who had either been at the Post Office a brief time or joined me there, and clandestinely, secretly, charging them with the task of reviewing every element of the Post Office Department and trying to develop a "if you had your druthers, how should it function?"

That went on for a considerable period of time and they did their research. They had to lean on career people for research but it was never considered that was being done for this bottom-line purpose I had in mind. Then you would have to sell it to the major mail users of this country and to the President of the United States. It didn't take long after [my] arrival to [have to] cope with the crisis aspects, the snowstorms at Christmas time, the semi-strikes in some post offices, problems that started to crop up regarding equal opportunity. [You had to] cope with it to the best of your ability, but hope that while you were there, because of your unique situation--your relationship with the White House and the President--you had an opportunity to launch a meaningful program that

would reconstitute the department totally. Having in mind that if you got broad-based support from the private sector [and] you have the support from the President, you then had the most difficult area and that was the Congress. You would never get meaningful support in the Congress if indeed it was true that members of Congress treasured the patronage with the postal service.

Tape 1 of 3, Side 2

O: I concluded that patronage was exaggerated. Sure, members of Congress were very much interested in postmasters or rural mail carriers or regional directors or whatever, but the political reality was that every time they engaged in that, they made enemies. While it might be fun and games, a sensible member of Congress might conclude that weighing it on a scale, it was a negative not a positive, politically, to have patronage. So having that in mind gave you some comfort in envisioning down the road that this patronage aspect would not be as overriding with the Congress as people would assume.

I was trying to keep abreast of the service on a daily basis, having in mind that it was not in the cards that you were going to personally reorganize the postal service. You had to travel this other road, which hopefully might lead to focusing on this problem and getting a consensus, all while I was trying to stay abreast of the legislative program and doing a fair amount of travelling as postmaster general.

The unions would, of course, invite you to their annual convention, and of course you had to go. They would have these massive convention dinners and you'd go to them. You'd give the "we're-all-part-of-the-team" speech, and look up and down the head table at the congressmen and senators lined up to tell these people how great they are. As long as I'm going to travel extensively, I'm going to also engage in some political checking and take speaking engagements that will expose me to the political side to try to keep abreast of that.

So putting it all together, you did have your postal responsibilities, your legislative responsibilities, and political responsibility to the President. When it was announced that I was to be postmaster general, the reaction was "Here's another Jim Farley type who's going to be postmaster general." I was asked about it and I said, "I recognize the seriousness of this assignment and the responsibility I have. You can be sure I will devote most of my time to it." (Laughter) Well, most of my time was spent--here's a fellow who's becoming postmaster general who says he'll devote most of his time to it. Not all of it, but most of it. (Laughter) I did say that, and it was treated humorously. As it turned out, it was most of my time.

G: The time allocation question must have been a real problem for you, because you did travel around the country and you did make a lot of political speeches for Democratic candidates in 1966. Yet you did indicate the enormity of the problems that the Post Office Department faced. Was there an inherent inconsistency here in your citing these problems and yet devoting a good deal of time on the other [hand] to political problems?

O: No. Ira Kapenstein was a member of that task force, and he was in constant communication with me. Your attention would be directed to their findings and how best to launch a program to attract public attention to the problems of the service and what could be done.

I tried to make some impact on the overall budget of the Post Office Department, and I engaged in discussions with Charlie Schultze, which ultimately led me to appealing my postal budget to the President. I asked to meet with the President and Schultze, and I had developed, on an item basis, areas that I felt I could sell in terms of increasing our budget allocation. And I think the President enjoyed that, he got a little--

G: Was Schultze there at the time?

O: Yes.

G: Let me ask you to describe the give and take in that meeting.

O: We're talking about something like a hundred million, I don't know, but in those terms. I had a list of items that I felt needed improving and justifiably so; they were just too low. And I went over them with Schultze present. I'll say this for Charlie, he didn't put up a big debate. We're three friends sitting there. I think the President was getting a kick out of it. Here is O'Brien now raising ructions about his budget; this is a new role for him.

My recollection is that I got about 50 per cent of what I requested and that Charlie went through the motions of saying, "Well, of course you know things are tight." And [I remember] the President saying finally, "Well, that sounds reasonable to me," and Charlie would say, "We can do something there." So it was worth the effort. But I'll never forget the meeting--that was when I realized I had another hat on. (Laughter) I'm sitting in the Oval Office with the President and Charlie, discussing an area that I never had had any involvement in heretofore. I'd listened to cabinet members screaming about their budgets but I'd never paid that much attention to them. (Laughter) Then it was my turn.

G: Was BOB [Bureau of the Budget] your principal adversary in terms of a budget every year for the Post Office?

O: Yes, they had the technicians that could do a good job in defending their budget, so to speak. (Laughter) Charlie would have certain people on the staff assigned to the Post Office, somebody assigned to other departments and agencies putting a budget together.

G: Did you have one of your assistants who was responsible for dealing with this aspect of the Post Office Department?

O: Yes, the deputy postmaster general, really, Fred Belen, who was basically a career fellow. He had come from the Hill years earlier. He had been on the Hill and in the postal

service, that was his career. He was an expert on all of this, and I relied on him. And Ira, who was a remarkable guy and had been there with John Gronouski, was very adept at spotting soft spots where you might be able to produce something.

G: Was the Post Office Department, as far as BOB was concerned, easy prey because here was an area that did have a large item and they could cut it without any real--?

O: You didn't have a constituency that would be helpful in carrying on this battle. But the Post Office Department was unique; it pays 90 per cent of its way through revenue. And that's true. But if you're talking about billions then you were very much short, particularly with all the subsidizing by the Congress. You always had this deficit. And I think that the attitude in the BOB, or generally I guess in government was, "Well, they'll make their way through." Of course, that's nothing new and it's still the case. You were dealing at that time with sixty billion pieces of mail--my guess is it's probably twice that now. It's just a mammoth task.

G: There were two ways to reduce this gap. One was to reduce the expenditures; the other was to raise the revenues, to raise the rates.

O: I was trying to remember what a first-class stamp was when I first went there.

G: Five cents, I think, and air mail was seven.

O: There were some people who would argue, why do you have to have a balanced budget? Why do you have to pay your own way a hundred per cent? This is a service to the American people. They should receive some subsidy. The bulk mail users contribute to the economy, charities and nonprofit institutions, all of that went into the equation when we added it all up. (Laughter) You know, you were providing service to a lot of people who were just not remotely paying their fair share.

G: Tell me how Congress participated in this budgetary process.

O: You appear before the appropriate committees of Congress to justify your budget, like any department or agency. I believe the hearings on the budget of the Post Office Department were scheduled within about thirty days after my arrival. I found myself on the Hill, justifying a budget that, frankly, I had little knowledge of. Because of the relationships I had on the Hill, I walked in there on my first day ever appearing before a committee for the purpose of justifying my budget. It was patty-cake. Everybody on the committee, Democrat or Republican, was kind and considerate. (Laughter) I remember there was a great deal of sympathy expressed toward me and my problem, and a willingness to be helpful. I can't say I was subjected to any adverse criticisms. But that was due, I'm sure, to some of the fellows on the committee, bipartisanly.

G: Here is a list of the House committee, and then on the following page, [of] the Senate committee on the post office. Let me ask you to look over that and comment on your

relations with the individuals there.

O: You have to recognize that membership on the Post Office and Civil Service Committee is not the highest level of committee membership in the House. I don't think I'll go on the record regarding some of these fellows--but it was a mixed bag and I'm going to be more definitive than that. The Democratic side first: the chairman [was] fine, cooperative, but [there were] Democrats who had their special interests and their own relationships with postal unions, but more than that, had their special relationships with mail users. That was big business, and campaign contributions from mail users across this country were really significant.

Now, there were fellows, as I look, who were very troublesome in that regard, who were not prepared to adjust rates that would at least in part eradicate deficits and achieve more balance and equity in payment for postal service. And I'm looking at one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen Democratic members of that committee. Now I'll tell you, of the seventeen Democratic members of the committee, those with the closest association with mail users were one, two, three, four, five of those seventeen who were downright impossible.

G: Really? Did it reflect on their districts? Was it a question of having a lot of big--?

O: No, it was a question of [the fact that] they liked the relationship and it was mutually beneficial, let's put it that way.

G: So it didn't matter whether they had a big direct mail firm in their district or not, it was just--

O: No.

G: --more of a financial relationship?

O: The direct mail organizations are national in scope, and they were very effective and well financed. They would, over time, determine where they could be served best on the committee.

Now I go to the Republican side. There are one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight members on the Republican side. I'll go back over them; one, two, interestingly enough, three of those seven.

G: Is that right?

O: So you had, whatever it was, five Democrats, say, three Republicans, you've got close to ten--

G: The ratio was the same [?].

O: --members of that committee who are not about to give a fair hearing to adjustment of postal rates.

G: Were any of them doing it from the standpoint that the direct mail or the mailer was a non-profit, charitable thing, or was it strictly a financial [inaudible]? Did they tend to be urban rather than rural?

O: No, they tended to be motivated the same.

(Laughter)

G: There was no pattern, though, really?

O: No. They spent their time and effort with the mail users.

(Interruption)

G: Were these members, or not the same members, but the committee, influenced by the unions to the extent that they were by the mailers, the mail users?

O: It was an entirely different situation. The unions had, as I said, political clout. They had resources different than the resources of the mail user. They had vote muscle back home in everyone's district. They were well organized and they had lobbyists on the Hill representing these various unions full-time. There was a great awareness of this and a great concern about it on the part of many members. They didn't want their local postal unions giving them trouble. Those postal unions kept a record on their votes on anything involving their benefits or their pay and they made it known in a well-organized manner to all their union members and their families. They were potent.

Now, the others, those three or four, are in an excellent position to play that game with the mail users. It's a tremendous business, and it was in their interest to maintain a good relationship with the appropriate committees to head off as best they could attempts to move their rates up. So it was a constant battle in those areas.

G: How much cohesiveness was there among the big users? Did they have a fairly tight--?

O: Yes, yes. They were well organized, they had a national organization, offices in Washington.

G: What was the fellow's name who was the Washington--Dailey, John J. Dailey--

O: Yes.

G: --of the Direct Mail Advertising Association. Was that one of the big user groups?

O: That's one. That would be the type of [organization], yes.

G: Now, let's look at the Senate side.

O: First of all, the Senate committee had a keen interest in postal service and Mike Monroney was an excellent chairman. The only person I had any problem with was Dan Brewster, and that did not relate to what we've been talking about. Dan Brewster was the only difficult person when I was confirmed by the Senate, when he asked me about mail cover. We've mentioned that before. Rather than say to him, "I don't know what you're talking about," which I should have, I guess, I tried to say, "Let me look into it, and you can be sure I'll look into it." That wasn't satisfactory, and of course I hadn't been off the Hill fifteen minutes when I was asking, "What the devil is mail cover?" As it turned out, he was subjected to mail cover, and that came out later in another context.

G: Did he realize it at the time, is that--?

O: Apparently he was suspicious of it.

G: Well, maybe that explains his peculiar [interest].

O: Some time later and in an entirely different context, Dan had to do some explaining, and it turned out that there had been a mail cover on him, as I recall. I don't know. The fact is that other than that little incident, I don't recall anything about Brewster in terms of dealing with the committee. Mike Monroney chaired that committee effectively, and Mike had a keen interest in the postal service. I don't want to be knocking a lot of people on the House committee; it would be grossly unfair. If you take a total of five or six out of a twenty-five member committee, and among them two or three were really troublesome, you then have to note the others on that committee who were not in that category at all but were responsible members.

G: Were there battles between the House and Senate over postal issues? For example, I've read somewhere that the House was inclined to favor much broader franking privileges than the Senate because the House members wanted to circulate mailings statewide in the hopes of maybe running for the Senate, and the senators opposed this sort of thing.

O: There was some of that. I think probably the surprise factor was the patronage side, because historically postal patronage was considered an integral part of the political process. The power of the postmaster general apparently reached its peak in the period of Jim Farley. The Post Office Department building was beautifully constructed and the postmaster general had the largest office in Washington. A mammoth office with a bedroom, kitchen, two fireplaces, panelled, and his reception room would seat comfortably probably four to six hundred people, if you wanted to use it as an auditorium. They tell me that in the days of the Depression, when [James] Farley was postmaster

general and had the position of chairman of the Democratic Party, there'd be hundreds filing through that reception room each day, and Farley would be taking notes, or an aide of his would, and he could place people into postal jobs all over the country. Sometimes I suppose [they were] temporary assignments, but it was a desperate situation for a lot of people and the Post Office Department was a political source for employment.

By my time, the Post Office Department was well organized, unionized, and you weren't in that climate. By that time, however, postal employment was, including salaries and benefits, at a solid level compared to the private sector. There was one internal problem the postal unions had, and that was the salary level, of course, was applied nationally. The argument with New York unions, which was an internal problem these unions had at a time when they were negotiating salary increases, was [that] they should be based on the cost of living.

G: There was a tremendous disparity in the cost of living. Should this have been adjusted, do you think?

O: You never would have gotten it done, because the votes wouldn't have been there on the Hill. You know, it would have been major urban areas against the rest of the seven hundred and some-odd thousand. So they were never able to resolve that by presenting a proposal from the union. Of course, the New York locals were aggressive, not only in that context, but they would threaten to take to the streets. They were not nearly as placid as many of these locals were across the country who were reasonably satisfied with their position in the service and their compensation.

There was an interest on the part of the Congress in rural mail carriers. A rural mail carrier by definition is from an area where the cost of living would be below urban areas. In addition, mileage and other perks went with the job, so a rural mail carrier was a much sought after job and it was high on the patronage list.

But you were faced with so much. The numbers were so mind-boggling, whether you were talking about the number of employees, the number of post offices, the number of trucks, the replacement needs--and there was a little sidebar to that. I may have mentioned it before, but it's worth noting. I thought I had a great idea; our trucks had panels on each side for public service advertising, and periodically, you'd change the panels. I was and still remain an avid smoker. But we were sitting there in a little strategy group and said, "Gee, why not join this anti-smoking crusade? We could use the panels, and it's great public service. There are organizations around the country who would love this and be impressed with it." So I proceeded to authorize it, overlooking the fact that there would be great consternation from North Carolina and Kentucky, probably, and a couple of other places. And the members of Congress, the senators, just landed on me.

G: Did they really?

O: We adjusted that by eliminating putting the advertising on the trucks in those states.

(Laughter) We went ahead with the national program.

G: That was someone like Sam Ervin?

O: I forget now exactly who they were, but they were calling me and they were making no bones about it. To have a government entity utilizing its facilities to urge people to stop smoking was not in the cards. (Laughter)

G: Going back to the members of the related committees in the House and Senate, if you went into the district of one of the House members on that committee, would you find a much more elaborate post office than you would find in a member's district who was not on the committee?

O: No, I never detected that, or probably I never looked for it. Post offices became a blur to me.

G: Did members of the postal committees expect more postal patronage than other members of Congress?

O: I wouldn't say that that was the case because they may have been put upon a little bit more than others, but the patronage would still be localized. It would go to their districts, and they wouldn't be in a much different position than any other member in that regard.

G: Let's talk a little more about patronage.

Tape 2 of 3, Side 1

G: Edward Day, in his memoir on his service as postmaster general, indicates that the patronage, surprisingly to him, was run out of the attorney general's office and that he himself had very little control of it. Robert Kennedy was the one who would designate who got jobs and that sort of thing. Any recollections on that?

O: I don't recall that, no. And I can't believe that the attorney general's office would have been involved in rural mail carriers and postmasters. Ed Day was our first postmaster general in those early days when the appointments were being made. There might have been some input from Bobby. I don't recall his book, but if Ed had said the patronage seems to be run out of the White House rather than the Post Office Department, he would have been closer to being accurate.

G: Is that right?

O: Well, I think there would be times when members of Congress would say to me, "I've got this fellow who I think would be a great postmaster," it's very possible that somebody on my staff would talk to the Post Office Department and give them direction.

G: Fred Belen had said in his oral history that congressmen really expected to be able to name the postmasters, that they really didn't even consider this a boon from the White House.

O: Oh, basically that's true, yes. I think that if you have thirty-seven thousand post offices, you've got thirty-seven thousand postmasters, at one level or another, and certainly the naming of a first-class postmaster would be a very significant step in any congressman's district; it would be a big deal. As a matter of fact, I remember when the postmaster in New York was named and we had a ceremony where I swore him in on the steps of the post office. There were thousands of people there. Bobby Kennedy as senator was there; it was a big ceremony. Of course, first of all, he was a new postmaster, but probably more than that he was one of the first major-city black postmasters.

So there was a lot involved and I wouldn't suggest that you'd debate postmasters, sitting in the White House, with a member of Congress, House or Senate. That member of Congress had his problems with postmasters, and Belen might have looked at it from a little different perspective than I did, because I think that if you're just Washington-based, you say, "John Smith named Joe Brown postmaster in Peoria, Illinois, and that's a big deal, that's a big patronage item." I'll bet you that that congressman had twenty to thirty applicants and all kinds of pressures exerted on him. And that's the direction I came from, feeling that a fellow with his feet on the ground might ultimately say, "Hey, this is fun for the moment, but I make more enemies along the route. It isn't worth it. Maybe I'm better off not being involved." And I wasn't approaching that as a dreamer; I'm not a dreamer when it comes to politics. But my own judgment was that this was not as pretty a picture as appeared on the surface, politically.

Now, there were those who would disagree with me. The idea that they could ultimately call the tune might be so overriding that the negative fallout didn't mean that much. But I think a lot of people on that Hill--I was sure of it--felt, "I have to go through with this; this is part of the system, part of the process, and I can't tell people back home that I don't name the postmaster in the final analysis. But it might be more pleasant for me if I didn't have that power."

G: Were there many occasions where you had a conflict between the civil service requirements and the imperatives of patronage on the other hand?

O: You're not apt to.

G: Really?

O: First of all, there are exams and lists with veteran's preference. You can pick from the top three.

G: So there were not instances where you would really have to bypass the civil service requirements?

O: One way or another it would generally work out. Perhaps revision or a new list.

The postal service is difficult, at best. I don't know how it's functioning these days, but a reasonable part of the initial proposal for reorganization was finally adopted. It's unfortunate that the proposal was not adopted in toto, but at least it was taken out of departmental status or cabinet status, and they were able to finance R & D, and finance mechanization and finance facilities. That was an imperative; at least that came about.

(Interruption)

G: You had talked at length about patronage. Was there any realization when you came to the post office how little patronage power, appointment power, you actually had?

O: I had an understanding of the process. This was to a great extent congressional patronage.

G: Was it difficult to remove someone who had been appointed due to the fact that they did have sponsors on Capitol Hill?

O: I doubt that it would have been difficult, because if there were situations like that, they would be cases that were so overriding that removal was called for and a member of Congress wouldn't be in much of a position to fight it. But I don't remember specific cases. There probably were some, but I don't recall them.

G: How would you contrast the clerks' union from the carriers' union?

O: In numbers, of course, they were the largest unions by far. I would say you would probably weigh them equally on a scale in terms of impact, potency, and the rest.

G: Was one more aggressive than the other?

O: I don't recall that being the case. You really dealt with their leadership. It was the position of union leaders that they had to respond to their constituency and be as aggressive as they could be in order to impress their members.

G: I believe one of your predecessors, perhaps Gronouski or perhaps Day, had proposed eliminating the mileage allotment for rural carriers and instead [proposed] leasing automobiles, which would have helped save money, and the rural carriers managed to defeat that.

O: Yes.

G: Did you have a similar experience here?

O: It was discussed. I don't recall that we got into it very deeply. Maybe we did, but I don't

remember.

G: How about your whole effort toward automation and going into a more mechanized, modern post office with optical scanners and sorters and things like this? Did the unions see this as a threat to their jobs?

O: They had a considerable sensitivity to modernization. They didn't mind modernizing as long as featherbedding that might exist continued. There was a reduction from a seven hundred thousand-plus to a six hundred thousand-plus, at a stage, probably a decade ago now, which was a result, to some extent at least, of automation. But it hadn't reached the point where the potential for reduction was overriding. There was a recognition this was a factor the unions would have to take into account at some point.

Our emphasis was to broaden the acceptance and utilization of zip code. But it required a lot of public relations in order to get it across. Of course, once you got the major mail users to zip code that was a big help. There was a great deal of effort in that area and a considerable degree of success. But then [when] it got to the individual mail user becoming accustomed to zip-coding, that took time and took a lot of effort.

G: Do you think that while you were there that there would have been more automation if it hadn't been for the unions?

O: I think so. I think that probably applies in the private sector as well. There's always a resistance to automation. The age now of the computer, of course, has been revolutionary in the major industries. The tradition of the postal service was the manual aspect of it; therefore, the requirement of these hundreds of thousands of employees and the reason that it was at that level and had been for some time were obvious. The resources to mechanize and modernize weren't available, so they didn't have to fear it.

G: The other aspect of this, the coding innovation, zip code, to what extent did the users resist this?

O: They, of course, had to absorb some cost internally. But the compensating factor was that they would be assured better delivery. So it was quite well accepted. When I arrived, there was foot-dragging, reluctance, or lack of knowledge. We did reach out for private sector help. They were helpful in developing spots for television; the networks were helpful in promoting zip code. There was quite an impressive response from the private sector to help promote zip code.

G: One of the problems with the initial zip-coding [was] that it seemed that they would change the codes, that they wouldn't stay with the same--

O: Yes, there was that. There was trial and error for a period of time. It finally was pretty well reconciled. But there were expressions of concern and disruptions in the process and changes of signals and what have you. But that was all in the implementation.

G: What was Congress' reaction to the zip code innovation?

O: I don't recall unfavorable reaction. It had been launched, and whatever the Congress wanted to say had passed by the time I arrived on the scene. I don't recall, other than on behalf of a constituent now and then, a congressman complaining. In the overall concept, there wasn't much to quarrel about. Everybody had to agree that if you could effectively have a zip code program, it would improve the service.

G: My notes indicate that one of the congressional committees, or a subcommittee, went to Europe to look at coding over there and came back very impressed with it.

O: Yes. I had gone over myself and I was impressed, too.

G: This foreign travel brings up another area of your work and that is the emphasis on international mail.

O: Yes. Well, that was an attempt on our part to improve that situation [and] have a closer relationship with western European nations, which might facilitate international delivery. I remember the head of the postal service in France and I entered into an exchange agreement. It was a very modest beginning, where we would have an exchange program to learn from each other, and it might be mutually beneficial. I remember I was particularly impressed with the operation of the service in Great Britain, and the recognition that that service was functioning quite well out of governmental morass, which was exactly where I wanted to see us head.

G: Was your idea, then, something that stemmed from the British experience?

O: No, it stemmed from an early recognition that the current mail service in some parts of the country bordered on the disastrous, and a recognition that decades had elapsed without any great progress or innovation, and the reasons for it went to financing and lack of aggressive research. Along with that, my conclusion very early on [was] that it was absolutely impossible to bring about a first-class postal service in this country with the strictures of departmental status and inability to invest in improvements. The only conceivable way that would ever occur would to be to remove it from departmental status and make it an independent entity, because you could spend the rest of your life fighting with the Congress and everyone else. Retaining the entity as it was and hoping for a significantly upgraded service wasn't in the cards; you had to look elsewhere. So as I said, it was a dual highway. On a daily basis you tried to do everything you could to improve the service which oftentimes was band-aid, and at the same time have in the back of your mind that, in the recesses of this, research was going on that hopefully would bring about an approach that would be completely different and would be dramatic enough so that it would impact on the public generally.

G: Back to the international mail situation, you established a special assistant for international

postal affairs and an international relations officer in each bureau. Do you recall the significance of this measure?

O: Well, it was to pursue the elements of our service that extended beyond the continental United States. To do that it was conceivable at least that you could have cooperative effort, and probably joint efforts in some instances, because you'd assume that those people in France, Great Britain, the Scandinavian countries would be interested in improving international service because of the flow of mail into the United States. And this wasn't something that we ought to just touch on occasionally in our staff meetings. So we structured it that way.

G: Any developments in relations with the Soviet Union in this connection?

O: I believe we made attempts; what developments took place I don't recall. But we didn't foreclose any aspect of international relations. After all, this was of world-wide interest and concern. Postal service exists everywhere in the world, and while we were responsible for half of the volume of mail in the world, there was another 50 per cent of it out there. Some of it impacted directly on us and there was no reason to restrict our efforts. Our efforts could be world-wide.

G: Limited mail service was instituted in North Korea.

O: Yes.

G: Was this a controversial move on the administration's part, and was this something that the Post Office Department initiated or was it done with the State Department's leadership?

O: My recollection was that it was done through the State Department. We became involved in mail service to our servicemen, to upgrade and improve that. That was really our role, and that was of particular interest to the President, too. But on the North Korean end, I think that was State Department.

G: In December 1966, you went to Europe, to Germany and Holland among other places, and had an audience with Pope Paul. Anything significant about that trip?

O: Well, the reason I went to Holland is they had a postal school, almost at the level of a college. It was an institute that had achieved considerable recognition, that we had heard a lot about and knew a little about. They had innovative ideas; they had mechanization concepts they were testing that were considered to be very innovative. Our feeling was that it wouldn't hurt to take a look at it and develop a relationship with those people.

In Germany, there again, there was a keen interest, as in France and England, in observing and hopefully learning more about their procedures because, as I said earlier, in some areas they were ahead of us. It was pretty sad to contemplate that we, with our volume of mail, had been so lacking in progress over the years, while other countries had

given more direction and financial support to the mail service.

G: To what extent do you think this difference was due to smaller geographical size?

O: To some extent, certainly, but when you could have guaranteed delivery in London and in Paris on the same day of mail, you had to be impressed. It was interesting, because below the streets in Paris they used pneumatic tubes. It was reminiscent of department stores years ago in the United States. And yet that was superior to our service, particularly when there had been an early-on attempt, which resulted in a significant investment of monies, in the city of New York to accomplish the same thing, and they had never completed it. It had been dismantled or left in discard. Some of that equipment still exists down there. We had failed. Now, cities of comparable size to New York in Europe had done this. People putting letters in pneumatic tubes by hand and sending them all over Paris were far better than our ability to deliver, even though you wouldn't consider it a very modern procedure in this day and age. You could literally deposit a letter in London and have it delivered in the city the very same day. That was very intriguing and it was embarrassing, because you like to brag about your country.

I don't recall that we gained anything particularly by way of knowledge of postal service in Italy. As long as I was going to be in Rome, there was an audience with the Pope, and there's a little sidebar to that, because I met with the Pope privately. There were three or four other people in my party: my wife, Claude DeSautels, I think, and Phyllis Maddock and somebody else I think from the State Department. In any event, I was told when I arrived that the Pope wanted to meet with me privately. It disturbed me because the members of my party were looking forward to this and this meant I would see the Pope and they wouldn't. I made the comment to the Pope's secretary or emissary immediately, and he said, "No, not at all. He'd like to visit with you for a while and then [have] the rest of your party come in." The Pope's reason for the private visit was to tell me that he wanted me to reassure the President that he was continuing to do everything he could to help bring about peace in Vietnam, and that he had had some very recent contacts pursuing this effort, and would I advise the President that he was very much in his mind.

That was the thrust of the discussion for fifteen minutes or so, and then the rest of my party came in and visited with him. We had a gift of a leather bound volume of selected stamps. I was presenting it to the Pope, and he reached over to his desk and presented me with a volume of Vatican postage stamps. He had the same idea in mind, but he pointed out when he opened the cover that it had been autographed to me, which mine wasn't, to him. (Laughter)

But that was the sidebar to that trip, which was a very interesting experience. I did, obviously, tell the President of my visit with him and what he had to say.

G: What was LBJ's reaction?

O: I remember he said something to the effect that "I knew that he was in my corner," or

"He's trying to help; it's nice that he took the pains to underscore it to you. He's really trying." The Pope had involvement over that time, obviously to no effect, but there was an effort made.

G: The Pope didn't elaborate on the specifics of his contacts?

O: I don't recall that he did. There were a couple of specifics in there that elude me now, that I relayed to the President. I can't remember whether it was a date of recent contact or anticipation of another contact at an early date.

G: The Pope did not urge reduction of bombing, or anything like [that]?

O: No, we didn't get into that at all. It was the quest for peace, to bring about a resolution, and we didn't get into the aspects of our continued involvement. He was persuaded, as he said, that the President was dedicated to bringing about an end to hostilities and to a peaceful resolution, and that he wanted to do everything he could to be helpful in that regard. That was basically it.

G: Would you have initiated discussion of Vietnam if the Pope had not done so?

O: No. That would have been a courtesy call, pure and simple. It wasn't something I sought. On a trip of that nature, if you're in the cabinet and the State Department is involved, they had an advance man. A postal fellow and a State Department fellow advance the trip. At each stop there was some formal or informal get-together, a luncheon or a reception at the embassy, something like that. As a matter of fact, after I left the Pope at the Vatican that evening, there was a reception at the American Embassy. I forget the Ambassador's name; he was a career fellow. He wanted to know what discussion I had with the Pope, and I refrained from going into the subject that he had brought up. He had noted on the ticker that I had been with the Pope for twenty-five or thirty minutes, which was a rather long time, and clearly he was concerned because he had no role in it, and it was his responsibility to report to the State Department on the visit. I felt, in view of the fact that the Pope and I had had this discussion privately, I should do what I was asked to do and report directly to the President. So I didn't tell him that the subject had been Vietnam.

G: You just reported directly to the President?

O: Yes.

(Interruption)

O: I guess an interesting aspect of this phase of our discussion [is] what did I envision the role of a postmaster general was and what were my reactions to the job. I suppose that President Johnson, in assigning me, was expressing his desire that I stay with the administration. I don't think I had any real notion about the postal service in terms of the extent of the problems. Once I was there, I felt that part of it was personal pride. Your

responsibility was clearly there. I should plunge into that job to the fullest, to the best of my ability. I also became very intrigued with it, because again it was a challenge, which is always something that you enjoy. The President made reference to it fleetingly on a couple of occasions, "If you need more help to release you from those responsibilities, why don't you hire some more assistant postmasters general?" But it was something I wanted to do, and also it would have been ridiculous to treat it in a cavalier fashion, you have the title and let somebody else be concerned. You just couldn't do that.

G: You had a tremendous increase in the amount of mail going to Vietnam, of course, with the tremendous increase in the number of soldiers there. Let me ask you to describe your effort to upgrade the mail service there.

O: The effort went into priority delivery of mail, as high a degree of priority as you could give it, without regard to the cost factors involved. It was a reflection of the keen desire of the President, his sensitivity to the needs of the troops over there, and nothing was more important than mail from home and prompt delivery of that mail, and also the prompt delivery of mail designated from Vietnam. So we put a good deal of time and effort into it and whatever resources were necessary. It was an area that could be helpful to morale and was very, very important to the fellows over there.

G: Was President Johnson explicit in his own desire that this be accepted?

O: Yes, he was.

G: Do you recall his conversation?

O: He recognized that this was one area where you could really get something done for morale. The great sensitivity of mail delivery to servicemen under the gun in Vietnam was obvious to all of us. It was a simple matter of ensuring that it was done to the fullest. That was something that he and I discussed; he had a keen personal interest, he was urging every action that was available to us. We in turn felt equally strong about it.

G: You went to Vietnam, as I recall, [inaudible].

O: No. Somewhere during that time the President designated me to head the bond drive. (Laughter)

G: Yes, the savings bond drive.

O: The savings bond drive. (Laughter) I guess he felt that I didn't have much else to do. (Laughter)

G: Tell me about that.

O: That was a little like doing head counts and keeping the President apprised of the progress

of the legislative program. The President was great for statistics and percentages of employees in each department and agency who were participating in the bond drive, and how it related to their past participation. We had a launching in the auditorium of the Post Office Department; we had all these gimmicks, banners and posters and buttons. My first objective was to ensure that the Post Office Department would have a better record than it had in the past, and hopefully the best record of any department, which may have been the case. I'm not suggesting that it consumed a great deal of my time, but it was another element of responsibility thrust upon me which I hadn't sought.

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G: There were some reports that some of the postmasters were being a little too aggressive in soliciting savings bond participation.

O: Yes, there were. They were being aggressive because they were being aggressively pursued from headquarters. (Laughter) So the degree of their aggressiveness probably was measured by the degree of pressure put upon them from Washington. I wasn't going to try to explain to President Johnson why the Post Office Department didn't have a good record. (Laughter) So we were aggressive and they in turn were, and there was a little backfire. I don't recall it was of great significance.

G: To what extent do you think your effectiveness as a postmaster general hinged on the fact that you had a lot of Hill experience, perhaps more than predecessors in--?

O: It was helpful. It was helpful in the budget process particularly. There was a real spirit of cooperation on the part of most of the members in matters that involved the department. I didn't find any undue pressures from the Congress on the patronage side or in any other area. But I think that whether it was appealing your budget to the President or whether it was dealing with the Congress, the fact that I knew most of them well and the fact that it was understood that I had a continuing dual role were helpful. It was an advantage.

What happened was that when I was assigned to the job, the Congress decided to have a party for me. Really, it was in the context of a farewell party, farewell in the sense of congressional relations. There was the normal reaction: "O'Brien's leaving the White House and he won't be involved with us on a day-to-day basis in congressional relations, but he's going over to the Post Office Department. We'll have a party for him." And they had just about all the Congress at the party. I didn't bother enlightening them that I wasn't going that far away from them. (Laughter) But as it went on and they realized, of course, it was a continuing relationship with them on the legislative program and that things hadn't changed particularly, it was helpful in terms of carrying on the job over at the Post Office.

When I got to deciding between Hubert and Bobby Kennedy after Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election, the disappointing aspect for me was the departure in April, 1968, from the Post Office Department, with eight months remaining in the President's term. I truly felt, because of where we were at that point, I could have

made significant progress in reorganizing the department. And that was a loss to me. It was unavoidable, but that was disappointing because I didn't like to leave that hanging. But that was it. As I indicated earlier, I was persuaded that the President would have been aboard and I would have been able to focus his attention on this to move the proposal forward. Instead the report didn't move out of the White House for months, and there was no action taken. It was only belatedly in the farewell address of the President that there was an endorsement of the proposition. If you could have moved that six months up, we would have been able to significantly escalate attention and direction. But it didn't occur and it became really a Nixon-Republican White House proposal.

G: You talked about your confirmation hearing and your initial unfamiliarity with the process of mail cover. Once you did become familiar with it, you did issue a statement, I think, saying that the Post Office Department would not open any first-class mail.

O: Once I became knowledgeable on the subject, and it took some doing because that was an entrenched bureaucracy--

G: Really?

O: --the secrecy went almost to "what the postmaster general doesn't know won't hurt him." Apparently that traditionally had been the case. In any event, I had a difficult task of eliciting from the postal inspectors all the facts on mail cover. Ira and I were kind of frustrated, because you had to come up with the right questions in order to get answers, and you didn't know the right questions. There was very little volunteering of information. Finally we got it all put together and realized this was widespread. Departments would make a request of the Post Office Department to put a cover on somebody and we'd go ahead and do it. Whether that was a legitimate mail cover on our Senator from Maryland--and I think it turned out it might have been--he had done me a favor because I could have gone a long time without recognizing the scope of mail cover.

To the consternation of those in this area, I severely limited all mail cover. It had to do with national security.

G: So you personally approved each [inaudible]?

O: No. But we set up guidelines and restrictions. I was visited by the Director of the CIA, and others made inquiry, but the Director visited with me and had a pleasant chat--I think it probably was [Richard] Helms--

G: Yes, it would have been.

O: --just recounting his previous relationship with my predecessors. That sort of conversation. It was clearly intended to elicit from me an agreement that nothing would change. I listened him out and we ended the conversation and it didn't deter me at all from putting in these new rules.

At some point there was a congressional hearing in this whole area, and former postmasters general were called to testify. What I had undertaken, the procedure during my time, left me looking awfully good in the eyes of the committee. They were aware of it, so I wasn't a witness.

G: These were the hearings on CIA's illegal surveillance of Americans or alleged illegal--?

O: It focused on the Post Office Department's procedures. I think that [Winton] Blount in the Nixon Administration became a witness, and there was a relationship between the Post Office Department and John Mitchell in this area. Now, that represented a change from the procedure that was in existence while I was there and I assume while Marvin [Watson] was there.

G: Now, let me understand the procedure again. And you did change it--I mean, it was one policy when you came in and then you did--?

O: The policy when I came in was not a policy that had been inaugurated by Day or Gronouski, it was just that you could have mail cover on request. A department could say, "We have reason to believe we have a problem and that we need some surveillance. We request that you put a cover on John Smith," or sixteen John Smiths, or some organization. The Post Office Department didn't perceive it was a decision-maker in that regard. What we did was determine how many mail covers exist, how many right today. I remember saying, "I want to know today, this minute, how many mail covers are in existence." "Well, it'll be hard to find out." (Laughter) And you know, it just--

G: So how did you find out?

O: We forced the issue, that's all. They couldn't hide it forever. And, after all, I am the postmaster general. So I reversed policy to some extent. We wound up with a full record of mail covers.

G: Were most of them dealing with IRS investigations?

O: No, they were dealing with just about anything.

G: Really?

O: I think depending on who made the request.

G: Did most of the requests come from the Justice Department or from Internal Revenue?

O: And Defense.

G: Defense made a lot, too?

O: Yes.

G: They did.

O: CIA, obviously, or I wouldn't have had the visit. But, anyway, it was widespread. There was one mass cover put on at Kennedy Airport that went on for a long time and nobody knew about it. But now we know, and the record shows, there are X number. Some go off in a given month, others come on, so it maintains a level of several hundred. We're going to reduce it to the bare minimum, and it's got to be a proven case with the Post Office Department being given information to justify the claim that this is national security. We want to see the file or we're not going to inaugurate the cover. And we reduced those mail covers by probably 90 per cent. Like anything else, "Why not put [on] a mail cover? Why don't we have a little fun and games?" Some of it was justified, but the number was most significantly reduced and the covers undertaken were justified on the record.

Apparently in a new administration this was reinstituted, but I never received another contact from the CIA for a mail cover while I was postmaster general.

G: Did you personally have to approve them?

O: No.

G: You had someone else.

O: Ira would be sure to maintain [records].

G: Postal inspection?

O: The chief postal inspector had to report to Ira to show him the records.

G: Was there a double standard of recording information on the outside of an envelope versus actually opening the mail?

O: Oh, yes, there were two processes. The most prevalent process was to record the return addresses on envelopes and deliver them.

G: But let's say after you established a new policy, in order to do the second, in order to open the first-class mail, let's say, did you have to have more evidence or did it have to be--?

O: There was not going to be any form of mail cover without justification.

G: Okay. Just surveillance of the mail.

O: Well, mail cover really is supposed to be taking that return address, but mail cover goes beyond that. It's a matter of interpreting what mail cover is.

G: Were you aware of any political abuses of this process?

O: No.

G: Either before, during, or after?

O: No.

G: Did Senator Brewster's troubles span your--apparently he'd been [inaudible]?

O: I believe so. I recall that something occurred later on; he had some difficulties which indicated that the concern he had initially expressed at my confirmation hearing was a matter of serious concern to him personally. He didn't present his questions that way, but obviously that was the case. He had become aware or suspected that there had been a cover on him.

G: How did the Post Office Department deal with mail fraud?

O: The inspection service and the legal department. And [where] there were cases of mail fraud, to bring criminal action. So there was a great deal of activity in that area that may have justified the existence of a score or so of lawyers in the department. And that would be dealt with by the people directly responsible in that area, dealing with the Justice Department.

O: Did the Justice Department follow up on these cases after they were referred to them?

O: Yes. And then another area which involved the inspectors was obscenity. And it seemed to me that they devoted a great deal of time and attention to that area. I was subjected to a deep briefing with evidence shown to me of a wide variety of obscenity and use of the mails in this area. My feeling was you ensure that the law is adhered to, but I wasn't particularly interested in getting a regular briefing on all the gory details. There had been a postmaster general who became very involved in that area, and the Department devoted a lot of time and effort to it. He used to intrigue the press by showing them the array of items confiscated. I had heard reference made to that period while I was there, because older people would still recall how he'd call all the press in and say, "I'm going to show you this," and the press would be intrigued in viewing it all. (Laughter)

G: This was [Arthur] Summerfield, was that--?

O: I think it was Summerfield.

So there was background to the Post Office Department's intense interest in

obscenity. There was an area of responsibility there. And my signal was, "Proceed. Fulfill your responsibilities under the postal laws." The mail cover was a different matter.

G: But how did the inspectors know if the material was obscene or not without opening it up, without doing a--?

O: I'll tell you, when they came in with this stuff to make the presentation on obscenity, I chose not to pursue it.

(Laughter)

G: Is that right?

O: It was too much for me.

G: Were they photographs or--?

O: There were instruments and articles and photographs and--(Laughter)

G: How about weapons being sent through the mail? Was this another area where surveillance was necessary?

O: Yes. The postal inspectors were really quality people and truly dedicated. They were the FBI of the postal service. It came to my attention personally one day when the chief inspector wanted to see me on an important matter. He told me that while you would get threatening type mail, which I wouldn't see, which they would follow up, that he was particularly concerned about a recent situation. He told me about this fellow in New Jersey--

G: Was it Newark, do you think?

O: Yes. This [person] had threatened to get me on a visit I was making to Newark to speak within a few days. It's interesting how something like that can develop. While I was at the White House, often I would send responses to people that wrote the President and it was done mechanically. This fellow apparently had written a number of times, and he wanted to be, I think, a postmaster in some town, a postal official. He would get this response from me: "The President appreciates hearing from you," or something to that effect.

He had had this correspondence from me, a half a dozen or so responses to his mail and one morning he discovered I was postmaster general. He proceeded to write to me as postmaster general, and was getting the same sort of response from somebody and he became very aggravated. So the chief inspector said that he wanted to have some inspectors with me on the trip. So I said, "Sure."

And it really was quite an evening, because not only was I accompanied by some of our own people to Newark, but when I got off the plane these plain-clothes guys surrounded me. I got to the hotel, and they had blocked off the floor I was on. It seemed to me to be the height of ridiculousness, until I got downstairs. They had this head table reception room, and Ira was with me. We were lining up for pictures, and suddenly a fellow who was just standing against the wall stepped over and handed me a card and stepped back, glaring at me. I looked at it; sure enough, here he is. So I looked for Ira; I didn't say anything. He was at the end of the room. Finally I was able to signal him, and he went out one door of the reception room down the hall into the other door, and I slipped the card to him. He looked at it, and he alerted these people. They gathered around the fellow and grabbed him. He had a gun.

G: Really?

O: He had been in an asylum and I don't know whether he intended to do anything or not. Now they quietly take him away. So at the dinner, they won't let anybody near the head table. He's already incarcerated somewhere. I don't think he had violence in his mind. If he were going to do something, would he be handing you [a card] to let you know who he was? But, anyway, that was the one incident I had with the postal inspectors where I was a party to their operation.

G: Anything else on the postal inspectors?

O: No. They were really in a class by themselves; they had a role to play, and they were highly professional.

G: Did they investigate mail theft, theft of mail?

O: Yes. Also, of course, they were charged with responsibility of investigating internally in post offices, if you're talking about theft in that context.

I don't recall how many postal inspectors there were throughout the country, but there were a fairly large number, and the chief inspector was a very disciplined fellow and very serious-minded and very responsible. And I think it bothered him when I got into this mail-cover thing, because I think perhaps in his judgment I should do what others had probably done. His view would be, "There's no point in telling the boss about this. It's better that he not know." I think it was a setback in our relationship early on for me to be adamant about the procedure and really restricting it. But other than that we had a very good relationship, and he didn't indicate after the fact that he had any concerns about it. Maybe he had a sense of relief, too, because somebody else had taken the responsibility and he had clear guidelines and he adhered to them.

But I think it's an extremely important function of the postal service. It's a highly sensitive area and extremely important. When you think of all the activities they're engaged in, they also have the responsibility to follow up with employees. There are

always incidents of thievery in post offices and it's a constant problem.

G: How big of a problem was it?

O: Well, in the sense that there was generally something cooking somewhere in that regard. That isn't big in terms of seven hundred thousand plus people, but the opportunity for that sort of thing to occur is obvious. It wasn't something that you focused on every day or anything, it was handled in a professional manner. All I'm suggesting is that I'm sure that a fair amount of their time went into that. Then of course if you had slowdowns or other problems that would involve them, too--

G: Is that right?

O: --in the security sense.

G: If you had a work slowdown?

O: Yes, on the security side you would have to be concerned.

G: Did you have any cases that were particularly egregious or significant in terms of theft of mail or contents, in terms of the dollar amount or--?

O: I don't recall any incidents. I think there were a couple of times when bags of mail disappeared. You know, that happens, you read about that every now and then, where some carrier decides that he's overworked and doesn't quite get around to delivering the mail. An incident of that nature makes for quite a human interest story when it surfaces. But I don't recall any major gangster-influenced takeover of the post office.

G: The Post Office Department did handle a tremendous amount of money: social security checks, welfare checks, things like that. Was there an inherent security problem with simply the carrier with a bagful of checks that he was delivering on certain days?

O: I don't think it's comparable to Wells Fargo and the rest carrying money around in armored trucks. I don't know how much the Post Office Department handled. It was substantial, but there again, everything is relative.

A difficult area was legal documents. Law firms put these legal documents in the mail with delivery time. So occasionally--and I must say it was no more than occasionally--it was something I was very sensitive to because you could cause irrevocable harm by failure of delivery on a timely basis. There were occasions when you would--not often--have to document post office failure of delivery in order to avoid the adverse effect on one of the parties involved. Maybe that's changed and I assume it has, with Federal Express and this sort of delivery service which has come into being. It's one thing to be getting a letter from your old friend delayed a week or two, but to have some document that must be filed by twelve noon in the Superior Court of New York or whatever, to

perform that service properly was extremely important.

Fortunately only on rare occasions did we run into a problem. And that said a lot for the Post Office Department, because a lot of that was in the mail flow every day.

G: Let's talk about some of the crises that you had. Was the Morgan Annex fire during your tenure, when the New York City--?

O: I was trying to remember.

G: In terms of number of pieces of mail, I guess, more were destroyed in that than any other.

O: I don't recall.

G: How about the Chicago crisis?

O: That was a crisis.

G: Let me ask you to recount as much as you can about that, when you first learned that it was developing--

O: This was Christmas time.

G: That's right.

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O: Well, Christmas time, obviously, was a very difficult time for the postal service. There was even a note of almost desperation because of the volume of mail during that period, the need to deliver it on a timely basis and the terrible adverse fallout if you failed to do it. The Chicago post office was a mail center, and it was halfway between the East and the West. And I believe there was snow. I think that we had a snowstorm in Chicago to compound it, too. That was the most serious situation I faced while I was in the job--very, very difficult. It was on the edge of complete debacle for days. My recollection, maybe I want to recall it that way, is that we came out of it finally without the total debacle, but it was the major crisis of my time.

G: What policy changes came out of it, do you recall?

O: I think that, first of all, we had several thousand employees in a totally inadequate facility. What you had in major cities like New York existed in Chicago: the basic problems of street delivery, and it sort of underscored all of the failings of the department in terms of modernization, mechanization, and it was all focused in Chicago. There were problems with the unions at that time, too. You were in slowdown, you were in disruption, and you had weather conditions added to it. And that was impacting tremendously on the through

mail going through Chicago, the movement of mail coast-to-coast in both directions.

G: Did you send someone out there?

O: There was a task force that went out there--

G: Really?

O: --a team went out there bag and baggage.

G: Who did you send?

O: I don't even remember who they were. They were shipped out there and put in place.

G: Was some of it related to this tax that New York put on printing, causing a lot of the large mailers to mail out of Chicago?

O: There was a diversion of an excessive amount of mail into Chicago in a hurry. The volume increased dramatically in a very brief period of time, and in a significant part, it was due to what you referred to.

G: My impression is that the mailers didn't bother to let the post office know that they would have ninety-three million more pieces. (Laughter)

O: That's right. When you think of all the elements that went into this total breakdown and debacle. There was no way you could have envisioned this escalation of volume over a short period of time, and it was due, as you say, to mass mail users.

G: Did the President become involved in this at all?

O: I don't recall.

G: How about Mayor [Richard] Daley?

O: I don't remember Mayor Daley being involved. I think that at least one of the senators and congressmen became involved.

G: Was it [Everett] Dirksen?

O: No.

G: [Paul] Douglas?

O: Douglas.

G: CORE was also picketing, demonstrating against what they regarded as discriminatory practices at that time.

O: Yes. That was beginning to percolate. We began to get isolated claims by employees that their position had been shifted or they didn't get a promotion. Discrimination claims began to grow. And there was a sensitivity to that, going over postal history. I do believe--at the postmaster level--minority representation was almost nonexistent, certainly in major urban areas. And there was a conscious effort made on the part of those involved in the patronage process--and that was true in Chicago, too, where we named a black postmaster--to start showing that minorities could achieve high position in the service. That didn't go to the rank and file and the percentage of representation in the service, however, and a lot of that, of course, had to do with the civil service procedures and veterans' rights and the postal examinations. But when you got to postmasters, then of course you had some leeway. And we did it in New York, and Douglas was in the forefront, I remember, for the designation of a black postmaster at Chicago; Bobby [Kennedy] and others were in the forefront in New York.

The Chicago crisis was a nightmare, an absolute nightmare. There was nothing left conceivably that could go wrong that hadn't gone wrong. Everything, whether it was CORE, whether it was the snow, whether it was the excess volume of mail, whether it was a slowdown, all of it was there.

G: Well, I think you've described that part of the process was to divert mail that was--

O: We did, yes.

G: --just divert it around Chicago, first of all, so it didn't shut down the rest of the country.

O: That was really the first step. Obviously, you had to start diverting.

G: I think it started in--well, the crisis was in December but it may have even started before that.

O: If there was a bright spot, it did focus attention on the problems of the postal service.

G: It started in October, apparently.

O: Yes.

G: Yes. I have a note here to the effect that at one point your task force considered burning all outdated third-class mail and starting over.

(Laughter)

O: That's right. That was considered. They thought they had two choices: either burn it or

lose it.

(Laughter)

G: To what extent were you personally involved in the decisions here?

O: To a great extent. It was a crisis situation that extended over a lengthy period, and you diverted just about all your attention to it.

G: As a result of this, did you require the large mailers to notify you of their--?

O: It flowed from that, yes. Of course, there was the case of each large mailer not realizing that all of his colleagues were doing the same thing and figuring he was going to have an edge.

(Laughter)

G: To what extent was this sort of thing related to just the change in mail transportation patterns, the fact that ten or twelve years before there had been ten thousand trains using the mails and sorting the mails on the trains rather than using airlines and ground transportation, trucking?

O: The cost factor and service problems contributed to changing the mode of transportation, moving to air transportation in terms of crisis to get delivery accomplished. So that was an element of it; there was this great change. But you have to go back a bit to the history of the postal service. I remember that C. R. Smith talked to me at length about the postal service in the early stages of the airlines. Smith said that American, or no airlines that became major airlines later, could have launched their airlines without the postal service. That was the key. Consequently, he said, the effort that was expended to get postal contracts to launch an airline was unbelievable--the pressures that were exerted and the influence that was exerted. He said that was the sole hope of he and others who were early in the airline industry--to launch and survive. Without the mail contracts it would have been long delayed.

So there was this postal contribution to the airline industry that was extremely significant. That's a little history of the department that I never focused on. There were three or four of them that started at the same time.

G: Braniff was an early--Pioneer [Airlines] was an early [one, too.]

O: And there was another one. Was it Pan Am?

G: Yes.

O: Yes. They all knew each other and they were involved in carving out new horizons. He

said they were two-fisted fellows, and he said, "We just fought each other practically on the streets for those postal contracts." (Laughter)

G: How about the use of trucks rather than trains?

O: Well, you were compelled [to]. The deterioration of the trains was a continuing one. There were two substitutes obviously: air, to some extent--the cost factor on short haul prohibitive--and trucks. And you wound up in a lot of leasing there--or contracting, not leasing--because, again, you didn't have sufficient facilities of your own or the ability to secure them to be able to get the job done. So as [with] the airlines to the trucking industry, it became an important source of business.

G: So the switch from rail transportation to truck transportation and air mail was a result rather than a cause of decline of the railroads, is that right?

O: A result, yes. I don't know what the volume of postal business related to other business the railroads had on the freight side, but you'd have to assume that the decline of the railroads was a factor. It wasn't the Post Office Department that brought it about. The department, in a sense, was a victim of it.

G: If you had a big contract with a trucking company, is this the way you would do some of it? You would let a contract--?

O: Yes. That would be, again, the legal department and the assistant postmaster general for transportation. He would negotiate the contracts, and it was a big business. I don't recall any scandals during my period in that area.

G: But this was done without congressional involvement?

O: Yes. That was part of the internal process.

(Interruption)

G: Getting back to the nuts and bolts, I wanted to ask you about stamps. At one point you were exploring the idea of a color, illuminated-type stamp that would evidently work with a canceling machine in some way that different colors would--

O: First of all, you were limited to five colors. There was a limitation on the kind of a stamp you could produce. That changed, even while I was there, and has broadened so you can be much more innovative. Secondly, there was a pretty well-established procedure that you issued, as I recall, some fifteen new stamps a year, even though you got thousands of requests and recommendations. I established a stamp committee for the purpose of developing and evaluating the stamp itself and its design, but it was helpful, at least indirectly, coming to a consensus on categories.

The process changed in later years. Now you produce, for example, a variety of flowers, and they're very attractive. But at that time you were limited in what you could produce, design-wise. You tried--and that had been the tradition and I followed it--to adhere to a limited number of stamps a year, avoiding a proliferation of stamps. It's very meaningful to issue a stamp, very significant, it's a high honor. You have ceremonies, you have first-day issues, you have a great deal of publicity.

So that was really the procedure with stamps. I don't remember the problems or processes you described, except my guess is that it probably has something to do with the broadening of the procedure to allow for more creativity and utilization of a variety of colors. That didn't exist back then.

G: Was there an economic factor, too, in limiting the number of stamps?

O: Yes, in the sense that you could concentrate on fifteen. There was a Roosevelt stamp while I was there. Well, obviously that lent itself to all kinds of activity. There was an Iwo Jima stamp. In your thought process was, are you diversifying within the fifteen appropriately? When we developed this committee, I remember trying to come up with names which would make it as prestigious as you could. I came up with Andrew Wyeth. No one thought Andrew Wyeth would serve on the committee, and I had never met Andrew Wyeth in my life. So I resorted to simply sending him a letter asking him to serve, and to the surprise of all of us he agreed to serve and was a full participant. I think the design aspect of it, the artistic side of it, appealed to him.

But this selecting the stamps was very, very difficult, and there was a lot of pressure exerted. There was a basketball stamp while I was in the White House. I happened to be in position to urge it. Then there were times when major organizations urged recognition.

G: The Polish Millennium?

O: That was a controversial stamp. The Polish government resented the content of the stamp.

End of Tape 3 of 3 and Interview XV