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GEORGE REEDY ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW I(c)  
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Gift of Personal Statement

By George Reedy

to the

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Signed George E. Reedy

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INTERVIEWEE: GEORGE REEDY (Tape #4)

INTERVIEWER: T. H. BAKER

December 20, 1968

B: This is a continuation of the interview with Mr. Reedy.

Sir, what part did you play in the election campaign of 1964?

R: I was the press secretary.

B: Did that involve any particular problems or difficulties?

R: Well, of course. A campaign under modern circumstances is a tremendously complex and exhausting experience. It involves shuffling anywhere from fifty to a hundred and fifteen reporters around the country, making arrangements, schedules, getting permission for TV cameras to be set up at the right places, getting permission to clear through police lines, fighting with police to get the wire cars in place, trying to assure that there would be some coverage for the press even under circumstances where something had gone wrong, which it frequently would, in fact it usually would.

B: Is it easier to campaign as an incumbent in the White House?

R: You have many more resources available, but you have that many more problems. The press naturally is going to cover the incumbent with a greater intensity than it's going to cover the challenger simply because it assumes the incumbent is going to win. And in 1964 there wasn't any doubt at all that the incumbent was going to win; that's the only campaign I've ever been in in which I was absolutely certain from the very first moment as to the outcome.

B: You mean as soon as Mr. Goldwater was nominated, there was--

R: Well, even before that, because it was obvious before that that he was going to be nominated.

B: Did you have any part in preparing the substance of the campaign, the speeches and so on?

R: Only in the sense of suggesting things. Actually, of course, there really is not very much preparation for a campaign in terms of substance. I think it's a pretty good rule of thumb that a candidate during a campaign should never say much of anything that he hasn't said before the campaign started, because the American people have a tendency to disbelieve anything that a politician says when he's campaigning. And consequently to get any credibility at all, he has to point to a past record that backs up what he's saying. I always thought that one of the worst mistakes that Adlai Stevenson made in 1956 was to introduce the concept of abolishing the draft, and of a treaty outlawing atomic bombs right smack in the middle of a campaign. He'd never said either one before, and the reaction of the average American citizen was, "Aha, another politician trying to make some blue sky promises." I think it hurt him, and it hurt him badly.

B: It was said during that campaign and afterwards that Mr. Johnson was just overwhelmingly intent not only on winning, but on building up a huge popular electoral vote.

R: That's the objective of anyone who campaigns.

B: Did you have anything to do with other campaign mechanics like this group I've read about, the five o'clock club, or the Department of Dirty Tricks, to think up ways to bedevil the opposition?

R: No. That was a childish sort of operation, which had no purpose, and did absolutely nothing but I think maybe create a little bit of sympathy for Goldwater.

B: Did you have the same sort of problems with Mr. Johnson's relations with the press during the campaign that you had before that that you were describing last time?

R: Not quite. He was still very popular with the press at that point. Of course everyone was so horrified at the thought of Goldwater even having a remote chance of getting into the White House that the press was quite sympathetic to him. The major problems that I had was that he would not stick to schedules, that he overdid his campaign in many respects--what the Rand people called overkill--and sometimes he would get carried away with himself and say things that he shouldn't say.

B: Can you recall an example of this kind of--?

R: Well, the best example was landing in an air field in Boise, Idaho, after the Walter Jenkins case had broken. And in talking to the press he made some remark about President Eisenhower having had a similar experience, that is of finding a homosexual on his staff. Well, that was an extremely unfortunate remark. All he was trying to do really was to put the thing in perspective and say that this was something that could happen under any set of circumstances. But that wasn't quite the way it sounded. It was totally unnecessary because the press already had the Walter Jenkins case in perspective. And this caused some deep bitterness among certain members of the press who were highly sympathetic toward the President at that point. What had really happened, he was tired and he was overstimulated by an extremely successful day of campaigning, and when he made this remark unfortunately it was recorded by--When I say unfortunately, I mean by that it was something that could be put on the air.

B: You broke the news to the President of Walter Jenkins' arrest, didn't you?

R: I think I did, but I'm not altogether certain.

B: I was wondering if you remember his immediate--his first private reaction to it.

R: Very quiet. He spoke in the unusually soft voice that he always uses when some near disaster is striking, very self-contained, very composed. He and I disagreed on how it should be handled.

B: What was the substance of the disagreement?

R: He had been urged by McGeorge Bundy and Clark Clifford and Abe Fortas to accept Walter Jenkins' resignation immediately; I felt that that was not the right tactic--that it would be a little bit too much--it would smack too much of abandoning a man who certainly had been a long, faithful, and loyal servant, and who, whatever he was guilty of--and to this day I'm not sure--whatever he had been guilty of, he was merely a man who had broken down from overwork and overstrain. However, I was overruled on the thing and I had the unfortunate experience of having to announce Walter's resignation.

B: You said the press was generally understanding about the situation?

R: Very. Extremely. Walter was well liked; everybody that had ever worked with him knew him as quite an honorable, decent man.

B: Was there any suspicion at the time that the arrest itself might have been politically motivated?

R: Oh yes. Considerable, especially when the various follow-ups started to come through. We discovered that a number of people on the Republican National Committee were calling the press and tipping them off to other alleged homosexual scandals in the White House. I had to spend one very frantic day trying to bat down a story of a colonel who was liaison with the White House who had been caught in the same restroom over in the YMCA where Walter had been trapped. And it turned out that this colonel had absolutely no connection with the

White House and had never been nearer the place than the YMCA. And there were rumors floating through the air that various other members of the staff were going to be accused of homosexuality; and these rumors were unquestionably pumped up by the--Well, some of the phone calls came right out of the Republican National Committee. A number of my newspaper friends told me that.

B: Some members of the Washington press were instrumental in breaking that story, weren't they?

R: It was the Washington press that broke the story, but they had been called. And I've never been able to track down the source of those calls, but I suspect they came out of the Republican committee too.

B: You indicated earlier that you had doubts about the validity of the charges.

R: Well, when I said doubts about the validity of the charges, I simply don't know. I've known Walter Jenkins extremely well for about--I've known Walter for about eighteen years, and I've never detected the slightest symptoms of homosexuality where he's concerned. I'm not an unsophisticated person. I know very well that all homosexuals don't walk around wearing lipstick and swishing their hips as they walk by, but usually there's some indication somewhere. And as well as I've known Walter, and that's very well, I've never detected the slightest evidence. And the story had some rather peculiar aspects, it seemed to me. Talking to Walter himself--I was one of the first that was allowed to visit him in the hospital--Walter told me he had absolutely no recollection of anything from the time he walked out of a party that was being given by Newsweek until he came to in the police station. Oh, I've discussed the case with doctors and other people since then, and I'm not overly concerned frankly whether Walter was or was not guilty of the offense. I've lived long enough to discover that any man can slip, and I've also lived long enough to



discover that a man under the tremendous pressures that Walter was under, and he was under terrible pressures--he was getting all the knifing that always goes on with White House palace guard politics. And a man in a case like that will sometimes take a suicidal course; and in effect being entrapped in a homosexual encounter by police is a form of suicide, because it's an unforgivable thing which allegedly shuts one out from the world and puts one in the class of a pariah. I'm still highly suspicious, however, of the fact that three policemen would be waiting there in the YMCA men's room for Walter Jenkins. Normally, that sounds like the sort of assignment that the police might have one man assigned to. As I recall the story said three.

B: Was Mrs. Johnson's very sympathetic reaction just instinctive or--?

R: Oh, yes.

B: Did the Johnsons keep a close relationship with Mr. Jenkins after he left the White House, after his resignation?

R: Mrs. Johnson saw them on a number of occasions; she was at Beth's wedding-- that's Walter's daughter. I think that all of the members of the staff, of course, who knew Walter in the old days kept in close touch with him. I don't know myself what relations the President had with him after that. Of course, it would be an extremely difficult thing for the President to be cut off from Walter Jenkins, because Walter was quite integral to his whole--almost integral to his life. I've often thought that a great deal of the President's difficulties in the White House can be traced to the fact that Walter had to leave.

B: Mr. Jenkins was that important to the President?

R: Oh yes, there's no question about it--there's no question whatsoever that Walter Jenkins had been the key staff member for at least twenty-twenty-five years, and he was more than a key staff member. He handled a great deal of

Mr. Johnson's personal business, including many of his income tax accounts, and the station KTBC, which of course belongs to Mrs. Johnson. And he had been the one who acted as a sort of stabilizing force. He was recognized as the staff administrator. And I have an odd little feeling that all of history might have been different if it hadn't been for that episode.

B: You indicated that among Mr. Jenkins' troubles were court politics within the White House staff. Was that particularly severe at that time?

R: Oh yes. I've come to the conclusion that court politics in the White House are always very severe. It's no place for a man of any real sensitivity whatsoever.

B: Was someone out to get Mr. Jenkins in the sense of usurping his influence with the President?

R: I think you can be reasonably certain that at any hour of the day or night some White House assistants are out to get other White House assistants and usurp their influence with the President. You see, a White House assistant lives a rather peculiar life. He has no firm base; he's not in the position of an executive official of an executive agency who has statutory authority and statutory duties and has clearcut instructions as to his responsibilities, to whom he reports, and who reports to him. The only thing that counts where a White House assistant is concerned is his closeness to the President. That's his sole reason for being. And since Mr. Jenkins was very close to the President, and I had been very close to the President, yes, there was quite a bit of White House court politics. It would be very simple, I think, for a good writer who served a term in the White House to do a book on the court of Paleolopus with no more knowledge of history than the proper spelling of Greek names.

B: You indicated last time that some of your difficulties in the press office might have stemmed from this same kind of thing, or perhaps I inferred that.

R: Oh, of course, I had quite a few difficulties that way. There were three or four full-time press operations going on around the place, and all of them run very amateurishly, but all of them succeeding in their purpose which was to enhance the standing and the status of those people that were conducting it. They weren't operations that helped the President.

B: After the election you, I believe, tried to resign, did you not?

R: Yes, I think you're thinking of the episode at the convention itself, which frankly puzzled me for many years. I only discovered a few days ago, oddly enough, what had really happened.

B: Would you describe that?

R: Yes. At the time all that I knew was that the President had decided to go up to the convention in Atlantic City a day early, which I had not regarded as a particularly wise or prudent move. It was unexpected, and it looked to me like a little bit hogging the limelight. And we had quite an argument over it--a very loud argument in which I did threaten to resign; didn't carry out the threat because the thing was smoothed over, as it almost always was. And when I was at the convention, suddenly a story popped out that I had resigned, and it was very obviously one of those stories that grow out of the almost incredible politicking that goes on within the palace grounds.

B: Did you know at the time or since who was responsible?

R: Oh, yes, Bill Moyers put it out--I found that out just a few days ago; I was told by one of the men that carried the story. Then right after the election, I had gone down to Mexico for a vacation which I very badly needed; and while I was down there, another story broke that I had resigned. And I had to cut short my vacation and come on back to Washington. And I don't know where that story broke--it may have been Bill; it most likely was Bill.

B: But you did stay on as press secretary for almost another year?

R: Oh, yes. I had absolutely no intention of resigning at that point--things were in pretty good shape.

B: And this is part of the byzantine court politics that was going on?

R: Oh, yes.

B: I might as well ask this outright. The implication here is that one of the leading architects of this kind of court politics was Bill Moyers.

R: Oh, yes, there's no question about that.

B: Was he just specifically out after your job, or was he just generally trying to be number one man--?

R: No, he was out to be number one man, and succeeded.

B: This kind of treatment of you was just one step in that?

R: Oh, yes.

B: Well, apparently eventually it worked, I guess. In July '65 Mr. Moyers replaced you as press secretary, and you did leave soon afterwards. What were the circumstances of--?

R: No, that's not exactly what happened. I think I could have held out under great difficulties, except that all my life I have suffered from rather bad feet. However, I was in the same class as the alcoholic who thinks that the whole world wakes up with a hangover and vomits every morning, as I've heard people say, "Oh, my aching feet." And I assumed that this was the way feet felt. At one point during the '64 campaign, it became almost impossible for me to walk. So they brought in an orthopedic specialist from Bethesda, and he told me for the first time that, "No, my feet were highly abnormal"; that I had prehensile feet which may be an evolutionary throwback. And that it didn't give me much trouble in my childhood, but that as the years went by

wearing shoes--any type of shoe--gradually warped the feet to a point where walking was intolerable. At that point they made some steel braces which I wore in my shoes, and which gave me considerable relief. The doctor had warned me that that was not permanent, but I had forgotten about it. Early in the spring the trouble started again, and the orthopedic surgeons--oh, they came up with a few more braces of different types, some special shoes, and a few things like that, but my feet kept deteriorating. And finally it became very apparent--I went out to Bethesda and had another very careful check, and got a combined judgment of a number of the surgeons--that I either had to have very extensive surgery or resign myself to the rest of my life in a wheel chair. And I actually left the press secretary's post, although not the White House--I stayed in the White House for another year--I actually left the press secretary's job to get that surgery performed.

At that particular time, however, I was running into extreme difficulties in the press office because I was getting less and less information, the anonymous sources were getting more and more; and I was under some fire from the press because I wasn't putting out enough information. Nobody questioned the credibility of it--the credibility gap came later for rather obvious reasons. But this particular thing came to a head, and I've often wondered since then if the press stories weren't inspired somewhat by the knowledge that I was going to leave to have this surgery performed--I strongly suspect that they were. And the two incidences coincided. Of course, when I came back from Rochester, Minnesota, I had to spend about four months in walking casts, and another eight months hobbling around with the aid of a cane, so there was no prospect of my going back to the press office.

B: Is there any implication in all of this that there was an attempt to force you out of the press office?

R: Oh, I don't think there was much doubt about it.

B: Do you know from where the force came?

R: Oh, it was Bill Moyers.

B: And then he took over that job as sort of an ancillary function, I assume, to his other duties with the President?

R: No. He took over the job.

B: What's your opinion of the way he handled it? You've already mentioned that it's from there that the credibility gap--?

R: The credibility gap did stem from his handling of the job. Most of the things that were wrong about the press operation around the White House were due to the President's refusal to comprehend the manner of orderly press relations. And I had pretty well followed the policy of not letting the press get past me, or giving them any hooks that would enable them to criticize the President. To my mind he was doing a marvelous job as President, and I was perfectly willing to forgive his poor press relations which I thought were secondary.

But Bill took quite a different tack. What Bill did was pin the responsibility upon the President in private conversations with the press. Of course, he disliked the President intensely--he had for many years--and made no secret about it to anybody but the President. And since Bill was never overly scrupulous about the truth, the phrase credibility gap I think was attached to the operations of this Administration. You see, the press, in dealing with the White House, is quite willing to play games where presidential assistants are concerned. They really don't care one way or the other whether an assistant is puffed or not puffed, or inflated or deflated, because what they're really interested in is the President, and the assistants are merely a means of getting at the President. And if an assistant is willing to feed them out some choice tidbits

of information that will enhance their standing with their papers, they're quite willing to write stories that this particular assistant is dedicated and sincere and earnest and progressive and all the other clichés that are really passwords and countersigns so mediocrities can recognize each other. And this to them is of no moment whatsoever because they regard the assistant as a rather transitory thing. And it's an operation that never helps the President. It was no accident that the President's popularity started to fall very abruptly as soon as Bill took over.

B: Are you saying that Mr. Moyers was aggrandizing himself at the expense of the President?

R: Oh, no question about it whatsoever. I've seen Bill--I remember on one or two occasions--one occasion in particular that I can recall. When they had some troupe of singers back from Viet Nam--a couple of young fellows who traveled around Viet Nam playing guitars and singing folk songs, and they had a ceremony over in the East Room; and these boys sang a couple of songs while the President was standing there. The President doesn't particularly understand modern music. I'll never forget Bill running around tugging reporters at the arm and laughing, saying, "Ha, ha, ha, ha! It doesn't mean anything to the stupid son-of-a-bitch, does it?"

B: Did he do that kind of thing frequently?

R: Oh, yes, all the time. He used to give excellent imitations of the President's Texas drawl and Mrs. Johnson's Texas drawl at parties around town. He disliked the President intensely.

B: How could this go on for so long a time without the President becoming aware of it, or was he aware of it and was just suffering in silence?

R: That's what a lot of the President's friends were never able to figure out.

- B: It doesn't seem like Mr. Johnson to either make a mistake in judgment or to suffer silently.
- R: A number of the President's friends tried to figure this out, and couldn't. Some of them went to him about it and got very short shrift.
- B: It's kind of curious.
- R: It is. Anybody that ever understands the relationship between Bill Moyers and the President will have the real key to the personality of Lyndon Baines Johnson.
- B: Well, then presumably--did Mr. Johnson eventually come to see Bill Moyers in this light?
- R: Oh, yes. Somebody one day took--I don't know who it was--but somebody took the polls and showed him how his own popularity had been dropping off rapidly during the same period that Bill's popularity was building up so rapidly; and I think that opened up the light to him.
- B: And from there began Mr. Moyers' decline with the President?
- R: Yes.
- B: And this, I suppose, is the background of Mr. Moyers' leaving the White House there?
- R: Oh, yes, there's no question about it.
- B: Do you know if they've had any dealings with each other since Mr. Moyers left?
- R: Not to my knowledge. I think the President is quite bitter about it now.
- B: Is there a connection here--Let's see now, you left the White House, I believe, in '66, is that correct?
- R: Yes.
- B: To go with the Struthers Wells Corporation?
- R: Yes.
- B: And then returned after Mr. Moyers left?



- R: There was no connection with that. Bill Moyers had left a long time before I returned. I returned early this year because some people came to me whom I had every reason to believe were representing the President, told me a campaign was coming up, and I was needed back badly; and looking at the White House, I thought I was needed.
- B: In the interval, one thing--you served on the National Advisory Commission on Selective Service during that period.
- R: Right.
- B: Were you sort of the President's man on that commission, or is that too elaborate a version?
- R: No. The President just set up the commission, and the commission operated pretty well by itself. He knew that I had quite a bit of knowledge, however, of selective service legislation; I'd worked on it during the period that I was a staff member of the Senate Preparedness Subcommittee; I'd covered the passage of the Draft Act of 1941 as a newspaperman; and was technically about as well qualified to handle that legislation as anyone on the commission except possibly Anna Rosenberg, who had been Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower.
- B: Were you fairly close to General [Lewis B.] Hershey?
- R: I knew him rather well. I first met him back in 1940 when he was a major--I wouldn't say I was a bosom buddy or anything like that. I had quite a few contacts with him over the years.
- B: Did you generally agree with the recommendations of that committee?
- R: Yes, except for the--I agreed with all of the recommendations except for the abolition of the undergraduate student deferments. The majority of the commission was for the abolition of all college deferments, but I didn't think that technically this could be done. And really it couldn't be. The majority

adopted a position that I thought was very peculiar--they offered a recommendation that all college deferments be abolished. But they had recognized that this was really an impossible thing to do, so what they did was to set up some transition machinery that in effect would have guaranteed that the undergraduate deferments would never have been abolished. And it's really a very foolish thing to consider--you have to go back to the point that the Army needs some college graduates, just as well as it needs some people who aren't college graduates. And my recommendation for maintaining undergraduate deferments was not that I was trying to give the college students a break; quite the contrary, what I was trying to do was to maintain a rational Selective Service System. However, with the exception of that one recommendation, and that doesn't particularly bother me because as long as you do have Selective Service, you'll discover you're going to have undergraduate deferments--there's no way in the world of getting away with it. I agreed fully with the rest of the recommendations. I wrote the minority part of the report on that point, and I also wrote the majority report on the conscientious selective objection.

B: Was there ever any impression among the members of that commission that the whole thing was just sort of a facade, sort of as a lightning rod kind of function?

R: No. No, the commission went about its work quite seriously, and really came up with an excellent report. It's highly unfortunate that Congress only adopted one-half of the recommendations, because by adopting one-half of the recommendations and then maintaining the other half of the old system, they created an impossible situation. I think within a few months we're going to find ourselves in a complete quagmire in Selective Service unless the draft calls fall off so rapidly that it doesn't disturb very many people. You see, the

commission report was based upon a concept of taking one year out of a man's life, either at age 19 or when he had a B.A. degree--either way. If you do a thing like that, you're going to find out that you have a lot more people available than you can possibly use. And there's no way in the world of distinguishing between them except by spinning the wheel. The old system called for taking the oldest first. Well, by settling on the nineteen year old draft, but maintaining the oldest first system and abolishing the deferments for college graduates except in medical and dental schools, Congress in effect guaranteed that the Army will be composed of graduate college student. This doesn't make the Army very happy and doesn't make the college graduates very happy, and doesn't make the college graduate schools very happy. And it really is a deplorable mess, and I don't know how it's going to be straightened out because it's awfully difficult to face up to this issue of random selection all by itself.

B: To get back to the White House, you said that you returned early in '68 to work, you thought, on the campaign.

R: Right.

B: And you also said you thought Mr. Johnson needed some help after you looked at the White House staff.

R: Oh, yes.

B: What does that latter part mean?

R: Oh, it was in very bad shape, as was the Democratic National Committee. For all practical purposes, they were virtually non-existent--inexperienced people, lacking judgment. And you know, one of the problems of the White House is there's no way of acquiring any judgment, once you get in to the place. In the White House if you tell somebody to do something, they'll do it. If you

issue an order, the order will be obeyed. And this is a very bad experience psychologically, because you lose contact with reality, with the people out in the field who don't obey orders, who do snarl back, who are unpleasant about things.

B: You mean the techniques for working in the White House are certainly not the techniques for dealing with state politicians and so on?

R: I don't think the techniques for working in the White House are the techniques for running the government. I think there's an incompatibility built in. This is one of the very few places in our society where you have at least for a period of time an almost absolute relationship between an order and obedience to that order. And you know if people come into the place too young, they're going to get the impression that this is what the world is like. Well, the world's not like this. The world consists of pretentious people and unpleasant people and snarling people, people who think that you're a Mongoloid idiot, and that's the real world you have to deal with. In this place, everybody smiles, everybody says yessir, depending upon your place in the hierarchy. And when you're out trying to attract votes and trying to lead people and trying to persuade them, they don't persuade very well by orders.

B: To what do you attribute this status of the Democratic National Committee at that time? Why had it fallen on hard times?

R: I really don't know why it was allowed to happen, but it certainly had. I went through the offices; I was rather appalled. The Democratic National Committee should be staffed by highly sophisticated people who are fully aware of the political realities within each state, within each city, who are aware of the forces at work in the land, who can call any state and get some person

of some influence and who in turn will automatically be called. I had had some premonition of this because I traveled around the country quite a bit and talked with my political friends in the preceding period, and I had received complaint after complaint after complaint that they had nobody to call in the Democratic committee or in the White House.

B: Is Mr. Johnson responsible here again? One would think generally that Mr. Johnson as a consummate politician would keep the machinery in order.

R: I would think so too, but I don't believe that his understanding of organizational principles ever went too deep. I think his political understanding was very high. I think he had this instinctive liking for people and this instinctive understanding of people; that he knew what moved masses of people, and he could move them. He knew what they wanted, he knew what their dreams were, he knew what their aspirations were, he had an almost uncanny sense of what to say to an audience, whether it was from the ghettos or from a rural area or from a labor area or from a wealthy area--he really knew what made them tick and what made them move. But he did have something of a weakness when it came to organizational principles. And as nearly as I can determine, he had concentrated on paying off the debt of the Democratic National Committee, and in the process of paying off the debt, he had really left it without any viability whatsoever. I know the Sunday before he resigned, I wrote him a rather strong memo on the things that were wrong with the committee and with the political set-up generally. And it was not a very optimistic memo. I didn't quite say this in the memo, but there was no doubt in my mind after having surveyed the committee and the set-up around the White House that unless drastic changes were made and made immediately, that he was going to be seriously challenged at the Democratic national convention; and could quite possibly be defeated in the fall.

B: Where did you figure the challenge was going to come from?

R: Oh, rather obviously from--Gene McCarthy had already challenged him; very obviously Bobby Kennedy was sitting in the wings and waiting nervously to make an entrance.

B: And you thought they or some combination thereof might make it in the convention and take--

R: No, I didn't think they could make it in the convention, no. But I thought what they could do could be to create such a division at that convention that it would be impossible to win the election in the fall. In one sense, I was much more worried about Bobby Kennedy than I was about Gene McCarthy.

[Interruption]

B: You were saying that you were more worried about Bobby Kennedy than Gene McCarthy.

R: Yes, because although I thought Gene was able to arouse enthusiasm among more influential people than Bobby Kennedy could, I knew that the Kennedys had genuine organizational ability; I never thought that the Kennedys generally had much political ability. I don't think they really knew how to move large masses of people, but they did know how to organize to make up for their political deficiencies. And I saw this as quite possibly a campaign--I'm talking now about the pre-convention campaign, which could rise or fall solely on organization. And organization was absolutely appalling. Absolutely appalling.

B: Do you suppose that Mr. Johnson was aware of this possible difficulty, and that this might have had something to do with his withdrawal on March 31st?

R: I don't know. My memo was pretty strong. I didn't raise the possibility of defeat in the fall, because you never tell a candidate he might get licked.

But I made it clear, in as gentle a way as I could, that some extremely drastic changes had to be made and to be made quickly.

B: Your memo went to him--

R: On Friday.

B: Just a few days before the announcement.

R: But I don't know whether it had an impact or not.

B: Up to that time, had you been working on the mechanics of organizing for the pre-convention campaign?

R: Yes, and I found it a very discouraging thing because there was nothing to work with.

B: You mean this absence you've been talking about of the established machinery and so on?

R: Oh, yes. For example, we had the Wisconsin primary coming up, and had absolutely no one out in the state with any political savvy that we could rely upon. And the reports that we got from Wisconsin were confused and contradictory; nobody I could find knew how Gus Scholle [president, Michigan AFL-CIO] really felt. In fact, I discovered that most of those people down on the committee didn't really know who Gus Scholle was.

B: Who is Gus Scholle?

R: He's the head of the COPE [Committee on Political Education, AFL-CIO] in Wisconsin. And we only had one solid base that we could rely on, and that was labor. And there was some indication that in various parts of the country, some of the local labor leaders would not go along; and Wisconsin was one of the most uncertain states.

B: Did Mr. Johnson take any kind of active part in this activity of yours before the announcement of the withdrawal?

R: Only in the sense of approving or disapproving certain things. We finally managed to send a couple of people out to Wisconsin who, even though they were not too knowledgeable about Wisconsin, were at least rather knowledgeable about politics generally. We got Ken [Kenneth M.] Birkhead out there; now Ken knows much less about Wisconsin than I do, but he does know political organization. And what little we were finally able to do was built almost entirely around Ken's efforts. He did an heroic job with virtually nothing to work with.

B: Do you have any ideas on other possible motives for Mr. Johnson's withdrawal?

R: I don't think there are really any motives other than those which he himself stated. I'm quite confident it had nothing to do with his health--I know that rumor keeps bobbing up. I mean, I know his doctors too well. One of his doctors in a sense is my doctor--Jim Cain, and I think that I know about as much about Mr. Johnson's health almost as he does. I think that he really decided that the game wasn't worth a candle. He thought that the only way he could get any meaningful negotiations in Viet Nam was if he took himself out of the political arena, and I think that's right. I don't believe he could ever have brought the North Vietnamese to the conference table without that.

There's one other factor. The President for a number of years had been on the verge of withdrawing from races. In fact, the night before the 1964 convention he walked around with me on the White House grounds--south grounds--saying he was going to announce his withdrawal the next day, which of course was absolutely incredible at that point. Naturally I was there to talk him out of it. I don't really know whether I talked him out of it, but I think that I merely stated the obvious things which he might have known within himself.



B: Could it be that he just wanted reassurance?

R: Probably. But in this particular case (1968) there was no one around except Horace Busby, who had been a strong advocate of his withdrawing for two or three years. In fact, Buz had written a statement for him to use in the State of the Union message in January of '68, announcing his withdrawal, and at the last minute he changed his mind. But on that particular day Buz was around, and nobody else was around; and I think that he had no one to really argue against the step. And so he took it. And I think it was a decision that was made just about that time too, because I don't believe he would have called me back into the White House, making me leave a rather profitable and rather comfortable position which was on the verge of getting even more profitable and more comfortable. I don't think he would have brought Charlie Murphy back into the White House; I don't think he would have asked Clark Clifford to leave his law practice to become Secretary of Defense, if he hadn't really planned to go another term.

B: This particular occasion you mentioned--you mean, this was a conversation between Mr. Johnson and Mr. Busby on the day or that weekend--

R: Yes, on that Sunday.

B: You heard about this from Mr. Busby presumably?

R: I heard about it from Mr. Busby, and of course parts of it cropped up in the papers. The President said that evening at a press conference that he had discussed this at length with Mr. Busby. And I know as a fact that Buz had been saying for a couple of years that he should withdraw.

B: Could Mrs. Johnson have had an influence on the decision too?

R: Probably.

- B: Did you take any part in the preconvention Democratic politics after the withdrawal?
- R: Only in the sense of writing memoranda to Hubert Humphrey, quite a few of which he followed.
- B: Did Mr. Johnson indicate directly or indirectly that it was all right for the staff to do this kind of thing?
- R: Not until after the convention. He very scrupulously kept his hands off, which I think was something of a mistake. You see, it became apparent to me immediately that the nominee had to be Hubert Humphrey. In fact, I wrote the President a memo to that effect early in April--that the Democratic nominee had to be Hubert Humphrey, and the Republican nominee had to be Dick Nixon, simply because they were the only two men that didn't split the party irretrievably. Humphrey could hold together both the southern moderates and the northern liberals, whereas Gene McCarthy would split the party, and Bobby Kennedy would certainly split the party. Furthermore, it was quite apparent to me that Hubert Humphrey was going to get the nomination largely out of the opposition to Bobby Kennedy, because Kennedy was the kind of candidate who evoked two emotions--one was adoration, and the other was extreme rage; there was nothing in between. And Nixon I thought was going to get the nomination for the same reason; a Rockefeller nomination would split the Republican party, and a Reagan nomination would split the Republican party. Parties rarely nominate a candidate that is going to split the party.
- B: Then did you participate more actively after the convention in the Humphrey campaign?
- R: I didn't participate actively, except in the sense of sending Humphrey a series of memoranda and speech suggestions.

B: Did you offer the President any advice on what part he should play in the campaign?

R: No, because I wasn't quite certain what role he should play. And I thought that he would probably stay pretty much out of it, which he did anyway.

B: To move into some more general areas and more subjective areas of evaluation, what's it like to work for Mr. Johnson? You read a lot about Mr. Johnson consuming his immediate aides. Is that a correct evaluation?

R: Yes, in the sense that he wants full-time, twenty-four-hour-a-day, on-the-job action. And of course when he's involved in great projects, this is a very delightful thing indeed. Nobody minds sitting in the saddle for forty-eight or seventy-two hours if they are out to slay Grindel or Fatnir. It does become a bit difficult to live with, though, when the projects are not of that magnitude.

B: But his attitude is the same regardless of the magnitude of the project?

R: Oh, yes. He will throw just as much energy and just as much force into a project to thank every member of Congress and every member of every state legislature with a personalized note as he will into a project to combat poverty.

B: Is he sometimes too inconsiderate of his aides? For example, you mentioned that he called you back here from a profitable and comfortable job at a time when he must have been at least considering withdrawing, and therefore not needing your services.

R: I don't think he would have done that if he'd known that the withdrawal was coming up. I'm quite convinced that at the time he called me in, he thought he was going to go ahead with the campaign.

B: Then you're convinced that he thought he really needed you.

R: Oh, yes. And the activities during the first few days that I was back indicated that rather strongly, because I went through the Democratic National Committee-- I got India Edwards back into it; she came back on my recommendation; my advice was taken in not holding the annual women's reception that's usually held in the spring of the year. I took over the project of producing commercials for the Wisconsin primary. The committee had ordered an absolutely horrible set of commercials from about a tenth-rate public relations agency, and I went through the ceiling when I saw them and got them canceled. And he was aware of all of these activities, so there's no doubt in my mind that he intended to run again. He can be very considerate of his aides at times. And the one thing that I'm convinced of is the man would certainly never impinge upon a man's economic life. He knew perfectly well that I would rather be back here helping him through a campaign than I would selling heat exchangers for Struthers Wells.

B: I've read a story told at least one time about you, although I've seen it another time told about somebody else; it goes to the effect that Mr. Johnson gave you a terrific tongue-lashing, and then immediately gave you a rather elaborate present--an automobile, I believe, with the comment that "you never want to give a man a gift while he's up, give it to him while he's down." Is that a true story?

R: It's true that he gave me an automobile. I don't recall the other part of it though. I've seen that story many times, which has been carried and carried rather sympathetically. Esquire carried it at one point. But I suspect it's rather apocryphal--I think it's somewhat in the same class as when I first went to work for him, I was supposed to have said I was hitching my wagon to a star. I can't imagine myself saying that I was hitching my wagon to a star, unless I had

about fifteen martinis under my belt and thought I was clowning in front of an audience.

B: Yes, I've seen that one too; it goes on to say that Lyndon Johnson is going to be President some day, and this is back in the Congressional years.

R: I thought he was going to be President--that's true. I just cannot imagine myself using that kind of language.

B: Oh, it's not the substance--it's the phraseology that--

R: Oh, yes, hitching my wagon to a star--good God!

B: That is a little on the trite side. Where were Mr. Johnson's greatest strengths as a man and a President, from your point of view?

R: Force; broad understanding; a determination to reach extremely high goals. And these were all qualities that stood him in very good stead. You know, some of the things that man has done in his political career are really unbelievable, much more so than they seem in retrospect; because over a period of time even the fantastic looks routine. But I don't believe that any other man could have shepherded the civil rights act through the Congress in 1957. I don't believe that any other man could have forced through the Space Act in the face of the reluctance and foot-dragging that came from the White House. I don't believe any other man could have so managed the fortunes of the Democratic party from an almost totally defeated and shattered organization in 1952 that it came back to control of both houses of Congress in 1955, and went on from there to capture the Presidency and regain its dominance over the country. Also he has a remarkable quality of understanding people whom you would think were quite foreign to his whole background--quite alien to it.

B: Can you give an example?

R: Well, this almost love affair that has gone on between him and David Dubinsky for many years now. Lyndon Baines Johnson is definitely the hero of the Garment Workers; of the people who were born in the Jewish ghettos; he's very definitely the hero of broad masses of Negroes; he has what amounts to almost adoration from Mexicans in Texas. And this is due to his almost uncanny insight into their psychology; what makes them tick; what they really care about.

Another quality that he has is intense powers of concentration. But this intense power is on the deficit side as well as it's on the positive side. When he narrows in on something, he can comprehend extraordinarily abstruse concepts. During the civil rights debate the whole issue turned upon a very abstract, very abstruse, almost jesuitical definition of the difference between civil and criminal contempt; things that went way, way back into the origins of the common law. And while he had had a couple of years of law during his days as a Congressional assistant, he was no lawyer; and I doubt if he'd ever heard the concept even expressed. But when it became apparent that this was key, this was crucial to the whole debate on the civil rights measure, he burrowed into that thing and within three or four days, he could have argued the concept before the Supreme Court. He's capable of looking at a page of type, almost glancing at it, and then standing up and reciting it word for word. His brother Sam Houston has a very amusing story--this took place some time back in 1953--when he was campaigning the state real hard in preparation for the '54 election. And he had a whirlwind series of speeches, and in those days he insisted on having a separate speech written for each occasion. What he'd usually do was get up in front of the audience and he'd have copies of the speech for the press, and he'd say, "Now, this is a really fine speech. My staff worked on it all night, and I'm quite proud of it, and you newspapermen

can go ahead and quote it as much as you want to; because here among homefolks, I'm going to speak from the heart." And he'd throw the speech down on the floor, then he'd give them the speech that had been written for the preceding occasion-- whatever it was.

One of the speeches that was being delivered in Austin came to him quite late, because I was writing all of the speeches in those days. And I was absolutely exhausted. I was producing six or seven a week. He was quite explosive about getting the speech at the last minute--he couldn't make that kind of a speech; he had to study it; he had to read it; this was no way to treat him, etc. So I figured, well, another one down the drain. A couple of hours later I was called by his brother who said, "I just heard Lyndon Johnson--I just heard my brother make the finest speech he ever made in his whole life." "Is that so, Sam? What did he say?" Sam said, "Well, I didn't get all of it, but it went something like this." And he started to outline some of the points. I said, "Wait a minute, Sam. Did he then say--" and I read a few of the paragraphs; and I could literally see over the telephone Sam's jaw dropping. He said, "How do you know--you weren't there." So I read a few more paragraphs. Somehow, between the federal courthouse in Austin, Texas, and this particular speech which was for the Rotarians or Lions or something, he had memorized that whole speech in such a way that he was able to stand up and give it without there being any evidence of a manuscript in sight, fooling his own brother who has spent a lifetime studying him and knows every little quirk--fooling his own brother into thinking that he was delivering a speech entirely off the cuff without even a note or a guide.

B: You said that that kind of concentration, though, could be a deficit too.

R: Yes, it can be. I think that when he's concentrating on what he regards as a major project, it's almost impossible to attract his attention for something else. You know, sometimes there are storm signals which you can see on the horizon which should be noted. And I'm wondering sometimes whether some of our domestic difficulty may not be due to the fact that he was concentrating so heavily on Viet Nam at one point that he failed to see the state of disarray of the poverty corps; that he failed to take sufficient account of some of the real fiscal troubles we were getting into.

B: What other weaknesses does he have?

R: I think perhaps his major weakness is the assumption that there has to be a purpose to everything, or rather that every move that people make has to have a logical purpose. He assumes when he sees a newspaper reporter that that reporter is looking for a story. He assumes when he sees a doctor that that doctor is looking for an operation to perform; he assumes when he sees a writer that that writer wants to write a speech. And he has absolutely no understanding whatsoever that most human beings--the overwhelming majority of human beings--like to have periods in which their minds and their souls just lie fallow, and that many people will say things that have no purpose whatsoever other than to establish a channel of communication; throw out some bridges of warmth and understanding.

One of the greatest problems that I've had with him over the years is his insistence on analyzing every statement made by a newspaperman to determine just what was the purpose of that statement. The first time I ever noticed this tendency was when Bill Blaier of the New York Times was talking to him one day after a meeting of the Policy Committee, and some issue arose over the Hell's Canyon Dam. And Bill with a snicker made some remark about, "I



suppose Senator X will be real interested in that." Well, it was very obvious to me that Bill was merely making a remark to show that he was hep to what was going on around the Senate. Bill was really trying to make conversation the way you and I would make conversation, if we met over a couple of drinks, or if we were having a cup of coffee or a sandwich. And he spent two days fretting over the remark, trying to figure out the purpose. And I've never been able to explain to him that many things have no purpose other than establishing human contact.

I can recall another evening on the Sequoia [presidential yacht]--this is when he was Vice President--in which Jack Bell of the AP had a couple of drinks under his belt; and Jack started one of those wandering statements that drunks will get into from time to time to the effect that he was Lyndon's best friend, and by God, he would tell Lyndon, and if Lyndon was going to act like a damned fool, he was going to tell Lyndon that he was a damned fool. Well, again, that's the sort of statement that a wise man passes over in charitable silence. Anybody with sense would know perfectly well that for some reason Jack was unhappy that evening, something had happened to him that had disturbed his psyche, and he was trying to reassure himself that he was a tremendous man who could walk right up to the Vice President of the United States and deal with him in equal terms, and tell him he was being a fool. Jack was very fond of Lyndon Johnson, and I was hoping and praying that nobody had heard this except me. Unfortunately Bobby Baker heard it, and ran right to the Vice President with the story about how Jack Bell was cutting him up on the yacht the night before. I remember having to spend a couple of hours soothing the Vice President down. To him it was just incomprehensible that Bell could make statements like that unless Jack were genuinely mad at him

and was getting ready to write some knifing stories. Jack could write knifing stories; he was very good at it.

B: Is there involved in this on Mr. Johnson's part a certain amount of over-sensitivity, or insecurity?

R: Neither word correctly describes the situation. Not over-sensitivity. I've heard that phrase used for years, and he is not really too sensitive a man--an overly sensitive man. What it amounts to is that he does not have the saving grace of humor that most of us have. He takes words at face value; he assumes that an expression for any person means what it says, that every word has a purpose; and he really doesn't understand aimless conversation; he really doesn't understand humor. And for all of his very deep understanding of human beings, he has never comprehended the sort of thing that Jack Bell was doing that night, where a man is merely trying to establish credit with himself in his own eyes. Consequently, when he reads a story, he reads things into it that aren't actually there. Now he's not being overly sensitive, because what he sees there is the sort of thing that you and I would react to just as violently as he would--the thing is we don't see the same thing in those stories, if you understand my distinction.

B: Yes, I think I see your point. Has he other weaknesses too?

R: I think in the past few years he has exhibited rather bad judgment of people. And again, I think some of this goes back to his belief that words mean what they say; that if people refer to him as dedicated and sincere, they think he's dedicated and sincere. He has a rather unfortunate predilection to flattery which accounted to a tremendous extent for the Bill Moyers syndrome. And also I think that he's a little bit over-awed by self-confident people. You know, there have been an extraordinary number of people in this town who

over the years have fallen flat on their faces, but have fallen flat on their faces with such superb self-confidence that the press continues to hold them in very high esteem. And I think he has some of that weakness.

B: How influential have Mrs. Johnson and the family been in his career?

R: Mrs. Johnson is very influential. She's a woman of sense and sensitivity both; she is very intuitive about people; she's not swept off her feet by flattery. She has a marvelous knack for saying the right thing at the right time. And she has extraordinarily good sense.

B: Do her strengths help counter some of the weaknesses of Mr. Johnson?

R: Oh very definitely. I know many times he has been ready to go off on some rash venture--I can't recall one at the moment--and I'm always very happy when he submits something to her, because she might make a wrong judgment and frequently does, but she'll never make a foolish judgment.

B: Does he submit most things to her?

R: Quite a few. And again, she will show a great deal of common sense. It's no accident that her press relations have been excellent--this is not just Liz Carpenter, although I'm willing to give Liz Carpenter very high marks for her handling of the press. This is basically Mrs. Johnson herself. She's not afraid of newspaper reporters; she handles them in a natural and unaffected way; responds rather directly to questions. And I think she has really won the affections of many people around the country.

B: Sir, I've run out of specific questions. Is there anything else you think should be said on this kind of record?

R: Oh, it's rather hard--you know, there have been so many years, and I have a strong feeling the Congressional years haven't been covered at all adequately.

- B: It's possible that we may ask you for more of your time later to come back and fill in some gaps on specific matters in the Congressional years. But while we're dealing in generalities here, is there anything else you think that you would like to record?
- R: Not really. I've never been sure in my own mind just what will interest history.
- B: None of us are, and that's one of the problems in this kind of thing.
- R: I've discovered already from some researches that those things in which people are most intensely wrapped at the time they took place very, very quickly fade. You know, one of the most interesting characters that I have ever known, and a man who taught me many, many things, was Senator Eugene Millikin of Colorado-- a man of just tremendous mental power and mental capacity. And when MacArthur came back from Korea, the feeling that I had and the feeling that almost everybody had was here was a enormous tidal wave that was going to engulf the United States; and that MacArthur might well wind up as the first dictator in American history. And I mentioned this to old Senator Millikin and he laughed, said he could remember when Dewey came back from Manila. And he was cautioning his Republican colleagues, "Wait a minute, don't jump on this horse quite so fast," because most of the Republicans thought this was going to be the final shove that would knock Harry Truman out of the White House and put a Republican in forever. He told the story about Dewey. Apparently when Dewey came back from Manila, the wave of adulation that swept the country was equal to the wave of adulation that greeted MacArthur. And he said strangely enough a year later Dewey had been almost forgotten, except for the phrase like "Dewey took Manila" which I still hear occasionally from older people. And he said, "I am not going to say this is going to happen to MacArthur,

but I have a feeling that it will." And sure enough, a couple of years later MacArthur showed up to make a speech at the Republican convention, and the only newspaper story that I saw that treated it at any length began by noting how he didn't look quite so grand without his uniform; and how the klieg lights did nothing but emphasize the bald spot on his head.

But it really is amazing how quickly so many of the burning issues will fade. I doubt if the average American today really knows who McCarthy and McCarthyism was. This is another thing that hasn't been covered very adequately. I think that the President played a very crucial role in deflating the McCarthy thing--very crucial.

B: In getting the censure resolution in the Senate?

R: Yes. But even more than that in the whole overall strategy. Again though, this is an example of what I was speaking about today--I doubt if very many people know who Joe McCarthy was. I ran into Jean, his wife, a few weeks ago at a party and, my God, I didn't even recognize her. She has become rather matronly. I don't think anybody at the party except me knew she was Joe's wife at one time.

B: I had no idea she was still living in Washington myself. You're right. One reason why we've been casting such a wide net in this is because we don't know either what future scholars will deem important; we just have to hope we're doing them some service here.

R: Have you interviewed Gerry Segal?

B: We will.

R: I think that's a very important interview.

B: Well, if there's nothing else here, we'll turn this off now.

R: Right.