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GEORGE E. REEDY

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George E. Reedy August 24, 1995
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Date

INTERVIEW XXV

DATE: August 7, 1990

INTERVIEWEE: GEORGE REEDY

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mr. Reedy's office, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: You also described last time the circumstances of your assuming the role of press secretary. And you indicated how much of your job was actually administrative, the logistics of getting the press where they needed to be, *et cetera*. Let me ask you to elaborate on that.

R: That's a very important point. The press secretary, if he does his job properly, is going to spend more of his time on administrative work than on any other single thing, because the basic point here is to see that the press has access to the president, or at least access to presidential thinking and presidential strategy and plans and what have you. If it were solely and simply a spokesman's job, it would be easy. All you would have to do would be to keep up with what's going on and just tell the press. The press would be very foolish if they'd ever settle for that, incidentally. If the press depends upon the press secretary as their source of news, that means the press secretary can decide pretty well what they're going to know and what they aren't. And of course it's not quite like that.

The White House--it is impossible to have a truly closed White House. It cannot be done. There are too many leaks. The president has to deal with too many people outside the White House, every congressman that comes in, all the various agencies. The

idea that you can really bottle things up in the White House is a little overblown.

But when you start to think of the problems of coverage that the press has--for example, Lyndon Johnson could decide he wanted to go down to his Ranch. He could make that decision at one o'clock, pick up a phone and by two-thirty a helicopter would be waiting on the South Lawn. His bags would be all packed, all he'd have to do would be to step out the rear door of the office, step into the helicopter, take off, go on down to Andrews Air Force Base, step off the helicopter, step into that big 707 and be off to Austin. Three or four hours later he'd be at his Ranch, with fifty-five journalists that had to follow and keep up with him. They can't call and get a helicopter. They can't call and get an airplane. They can't call and get reservations at the Hotel Driskill that evening. It's up to the press secretary. Of course, from a technical standpoint you've got assistants to do all that, that do the actual calling, this, that or the other. But still you have the problems of management, of seeing that these things are done.

When the president is in some sort of a parade or some function of that nature, somebody has to be there to tell the Secret Service who are the known journalists that can safely be let near the president, and who is unusual and should be excluded. Somebody has to see that the formal statements are put out properly and gotten out. Somebody has to see to it that things [physical facilities] are erected so that they can get at the president.

Now that was one thing that Lyndon Johnson never understood. He looked upon the press secretary's job as one of thinking up ways to get his name in the paper. He once told me that that was the press secretary's job. My jaw dropped to think that you'd have to hire somebody to get the name of the president of the United States in a paper. For the

love of God! Or to think up pictures that would be printed in the paper. Again, it's mind-boggling in a way. You spend more of your time trying to keep his name out than you do trying to get it in. He never understood that the press secretary's job is an overall job of trying to present a long-range, viable image of the president, and also to try to anticipate down the line those things that are going to come up in the future and to try to head them off before they come up. This was one of his great weaknesses, his failure to realize that one thing leads to another, that when you do something you get a headline out of it. Now the headline may disappear, but six months later it can bob up on you, like, "Read my lips."

Another bad thing: I think he also had the idea that the press secretary should find stories for the press so they leave the president alone to be president. I don't think LBJ ever connected the job of running the presidency with the communications out of the White House. I think that he thought that communications were solely to get your name in the paper. Oh, he liked favorable columns, of course. He understood that you worked on, in those days, Joe Alsop, or Stu Alsop, or somebody like that in order to get nice things written about you in the paper. But I was never very impressed with the value of the columnists. I know they make an impact in Washington because everybody in Washington reads them, but I've got, I think, a fairly well founded suspicion that all the columnists really do is feed raw meat to the troops.

In other words, if you are a liberal columnist, it means you give all of the liberals something to talk about. If you are a conservative columnist then you give all of the conservatives something to talk about, but the liberals are still liberals and the

conservatives are still conservatives. This is merely passing ammunition, no more than that. I don't think anybody ever got converted by a column. I don't think columns have any indication whatsoever with who is going to win an election or who's on top, who's on first, who's on third, who's winning, who's losing.

I have a feeling that Bush has some understanding of this, by the way. I think he realizes that what a president says is one of the principal means through which he runs the country.

That's something else. I think almost every president, when he enters the office--I've checked this out pretty carefully in what they've written about it--they all seem to think when they step into the office they're stepping into an office of power. That's not what they're stepping into. What they're stepping into is a first-class platform from which they can try to persuade the American people to do what they want them to do, and that has to be done through the communications process. He thought of it almost entirely as a business of diverting the press.

I remember one episode that may clarify what I'm trying to say. At one point during the campaign that year, Goldwater made a speech somewhere in which he said he wanted to talk to LBJ about eliminating civil rights as an issue from the 1964 campaign. Well, of course that's absolutely ridiculous, but at first it sounds like a rather clever ploy. And I realized that here was an opportunity to really score some points. I wrote out a long statement for him--you'll find it somewhere back in the files if you really want it, which I doubt if you will--in which in effect I had Johnson say, sure, I'm willing to meet him. Let him come on in, but if he thinks that I'm going to refuse to discuss publicly

anything that is on the minds of the American people, he's wrong. The American people are entitled to it and I do not see this kind of campaigning in which you do not let the American people know what they're voting for. It was a beaut, really. And I'll never forget, at first he refused to do it at all. He said that the answer should be two lines, because he was entirely thinking of the headline for that day. Jack Valenti and I both worked on him. Jack saw it immediately. It was about that long; it was a fairly long statement. Boy, when we finally talked him into it, I don't think Goldwater ever had a chance. In fact, I sometimes wonder whether Johnson and Everett Dirksen didn't set up Goldwater as the Republican candidate. But he blew it right there, whatever chance he had.

But you see my main point here is that when you did give Johnson an opportunity to use presidential rhetoric and communications as a tool, a weapon, he didn't recognize it. He didn't think of it in those terms. To him communications were entirely in the press.

G: What about a situation where a policy would be decided on in a particular matter; would he bring you into the deliberations to discuss the implications on the press, or in terms of how he would--?

R: No, that was one of the worst parts of it. Again, he made a separation between policy and the press. As far as he was concerned, the press was to be kept ignorant of policy until he was able to trumpet it, in some overwhelming thing. And I think he was a little bit afraid that if I knew too much about what was going on that I might tell somebody.

G: Would you say that you had considerably less access than you'd had when he was

majority leader?

R: Yes, considerably less. He became terribly secretive as president, much worse than he'd been--I think he knew when he was in the Senate that you couldn't be secretive. You cannot do anything in the Senate without talking to other senators, and you cannot control what other senators are going to say. So consequently he accepted that to a degree. But when he got in the White House I think that he felt that a president was entitled to have everything that he thought and said and did completely secret until he was ready to announce it.

That was another difficulty with press conferences. He thought that a press conference was solely and simply a situation in which he could announce something. One time he actually argued with the press that why should he have press conferences, why should he call press conferences when he might not have anything to say? Everybody tried to explain to him that the point is not that he has something to announce but that the press has a chance to ask him questions. I think that drove him even further from it. At one point he actually had a proposal that I stop briefing the press on a daily basis, that I just call the press in when there was something to tell them. I just stood firm on that one.

G: It seems odd, since he had been on the national political scene so long, that he did not have a more accurate understanding of the role of the press here.

R: This was one of his really great weaknesses. I think part of it was due to the fact that he was accustomed to dealing with the Texas press, and in those days, very frankly, when you dealt with the Texas press what you did was deal with the publishers, with a few

exceptions. The Texas press was either for you or against you and they made no bones about it, not just in the editorial sections but in the news sections of the paper. If they were against you, ha!

But another part of it is his experience up to that point had been entirely legislative. You must remember the only executive experience he had ever had before was NYA [National Youth Administration], and that was quite a different thing, quite different than being the president. And of course his great hero was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was successful in keeping quite a few things secret, but only because it was wartime. I think that's something else that he didn't fully realize, that in wartime you can clamp all kinds of inhibitions on information which you can't do in peace. You can't get away with it in a war, either, if somebody breaks through.

But Johnson's genius in politicking was basically the genius of the intermediary, the man who could step into the center and start pulling things together, make them work. Take a little from the left and a little from the right and then go through the center. When he first started out his presidency he had a situation there where his concepts of communication fit the need perfectly. He realized that there was a need for symbolic reassurance of the American people. It's not a question of policy. The policy is just reassure the American people that this nut with a rifle did not kill the United States. So for that, he knew how to magnify things. He was awfully good at that. He was awfully good at big, precise gestures, and he was also good at little things that had an appeal to certain specific groups in the population. I remember at one point a series of stories started to appear about Johnson prowling through the White House at night and turning

out lights where they weren't needed. His point there--I don't know just who he was pumping those out to, probably Valenti or somebody like that--was all those men up on Wall Street would say, "Ah, that's a man who knows the value of a dollar," and that it would at least neutralize one type of the population which otherwise would have been almost automatically against him. He did not have much support out of big business before he became president, quite the contrary.

One of the things that was the most unfair was the idea that he was a senator who belonged to the oil interests. Wow. I don't know of anybody who had greater opposition from the oil interests of Texas than Lyndon B. Johnson. I can count on the numbers of this hand, after you've chopped a couple of them off, the number of big oil operators that were pro-Lyndon Johnson.

Another way of putting it, he did understand communications in the sense of building a big picture, a big, unifying picture that was attractive. He did not understand it in the sense of one of the strategies--the major strategy in the modern world--through which one developed policies, drummed up support for those policies, put things in shape.

You know, another thing just suddenly occurred to me while we were talking here. I should have seen it, having just finished that book on the Irish politicians. Franklin Delano Roosevelt did not have to rely solely on communications because there were still a lot of those Irish politicians around: [Edward J.] Flynn up in the Bronx, Ed Kelly in Chicago, [Frank] Hague in New Jersey, all of the Irish pols up in Massachusetts. And boy, he used them. You see, in those days communications was only part of the

political battle. Political battles were actually fought to a great extent between machines, with the Democrats controlling most of the city machines to the Irish; the Republicans controlling most of the state machines. And it was a question of which machine was the most efficient. For those machines, your communications were totally irrelevant.

But by the time he became president, the machines were pretty well dead. [Richard J.] Daley was still alive; [David] Lawrence was still working, but the rest were pretty well gone. Tammany was a dead tiger by then. Carmine DeSapio, I don't think he could carry a bottle of milk across the street. The Boston machine, there were still some remnants of it, but not like the great days. In San Francisco the Irish machines had disappeared many years before. They'd been swallowed up by the Progressive movement.

So I think to a great extent, watching Roosevelt, to whom the communications were not quite as important because he had those machines--

(Interruption)

R: The machines were pretty well dead then, and I don't think he realized that politics had changed, and changed very drastically, since the era of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Now he was in on the tail end of it where there was still some machine control. Daley could still deliver a lot of votes. Lawrence could still deliver a lot of votes, but not the way they delivered votes back in the 1930s and 1940s.

G: Did you travel much with Johnson during his presidency?

R: Yes, everywhere. I was always with him, which again made life rather difficult. At one point he got the idea that the press pools consisted of spies that were trying to get

exclusive stories. Have I ever told you about this one before? Well, that was rather serious. The press pool had been installed by Hagerty, Jim Hagerty, simply because Eisenhower's plane had settled down in Tennessee or something like that once with a cracked cylinder head or something minor. [There was] nobody there except local journalists to handle the story. What went out over the wires would scare the socks off of a billy goat. And so Hagerty installed the press pool, consisting of AP, UPI, one reporter from the writing press, and one from the networks on an alphabetical basis, ABC, CBS, NBC, Westinghouse. MBS was in there somewhere too. They were just there for protection, in case a plane set down in a cow pasture or something like that. None of them wanted any news. All they wanted to do was sit down and have a drink and sort of chew over the day, the way people do when they've had a rough day. He was absolutely convinced that they were there to see if they couldn't sniff out some stories.

So one of the things he'd do, he'd get out of the cabin and he'd sit down with them. And he eventually got so I think they began to hate him. What are you going to do? The man is sitting there; it inhibits conversation. You aren't getting any news out of it. You can't get any news. The news is at the stops, not while they're on the plane. Eventually he abolished it altogether, and I could not talk him out of it.

He got awfully mad once when he asked me who had started it and I said Jim Hagerty. He insisted that I was absolutely wrong, that it was Pierre Salinger, and I said, "Well, Mr. President, I guess Jim was lying to me then when he said he did it."

What that meant was that loaded on my shoulders the burden of protecting the whole press when he was on these flights. Now that's a very tough thing because

obviously I, as an agent of the president, am not going to notice the same things that the press would notice or do the same things. I don't think it helped contribute to my popularity any.

You know, that I think was another one of his problems. He himself was so much like that. He thought that every time he saw a lawyer, the lawyer was chasing an ambulance. I think he saw or thought that every time he saw a doctor, the doctor was looking frantically for somebody with AIDS that he could cure, if he had known about AIDS in those days. Every time he saw a historian, the historian was looking to write a speech or something like that. And every time he saw a newspaperman, the newspaperman was looking for a story. I don't think he had any realization that people live normal lives in which what they do is not necessarily something they take home with them.

G: He did socialize with the [press]. He had the press out to the Ranch and their families.

R: Yes, he sure did.

G: Was he trying to win them over?

R: Yes. And that hurt too, because in a sense he decided they were an ungrateful bunch of bums. Of course this is common to most politicians. There are very few politicians that believe that newspaper stories are written just because they happen. Usually I think most politicians believe that newspaper stories are inspired by somebody. If you didn't inspire it yourself then your opponent inspired it.

But no, he did, and sometimes it got a little dicey. Like that famous evening where he was tearing down the road, drinking beer out of a can and tossing it out, and all

these women in his car, and Marianne Means cooing at him. God, that was funny. Actually I think that story helped him, by the way. How many American males would love to speed seventy miles an hour down a Texas road tossing beer cans out the window with a pretty blonde in the seat next [to him] cooing at him? But he did not have any understanding of that. He thought those girls were not going to write anything about it, which they didn't. They were guests; they understood that. But, by God, imagine what happened when they got back to the Driskill Hotel that night and went down to the bar for a drink. Do you think they're not going to talk about it? Of course they're going to talk about it. It finally got to a *Time* magazine reporter.

Of course, some of the press worked on it, too. I remember one in particular, a reporter whom I will not name, who went way out his way to get invitations like that. He and his wife brought their grandchildren down to Texas once and dressed them up in cowboy outfits, little kids about that big--they were cute--and stationed them right outside that church in Fredericksburg. Johnson, coming out of the church, saw them and, wham, invited them all to the Ranch, that sort of thing.

But it finally got to a point where reporters began to wish they could get the hell away from him. Art Buchwald wrote a very funny column about it. He had to look under his bed every night when he got home to be sure that Lyndon Johnson wasn't under the bed and would pop out. Of course, what it did was it made him kind of a nuisance.

G: Would he confuse when something had been specified off the record with when something was on the record?

R: I'm trying to think if a case of that sort ever arose. No, I don't think he realized there was a distinction. I think he had a sort of a feeling that if it were a social event, everybody was supposed to be gentlemanly about it, or ladylike, and not carry it. I tried to explain--the rules are really rather complex in Washington. There are all sorts of distinctions. You have "off the record," which is intended mostly for informative purposes. That I wish he had understood, because that was one of the things where he really irritated the press. He would not tell them at least a day in advance that he was going somewhere, which meant that if they made arrangements for a Saturday night dinner or something like that, they might learn Saturday morning that he was going down to Texas. But that was the purpose of "off the record." It really meant off the record, information to be given out only because the person that was receiving the information needed it in order to act, but not for printing.

"Background" was where you could use the information but could not pin down the identity of the person who gave it to you. You could only indicate the validity of the source, like "usually well-informed source," or "an unimpeachable source," or something like that. Then you finally had what they called deep background, which meant you couldn't even indicate the source of the story. Those things are all kept pretty--you can really rely on them. If somebody says that they have a background story in which they attribute the story to a source, I have never known an instance yet in which a Washington reporter said something like that when he was faking it.

G: Tell me about Johnson's appointment of Eric Goldman to the White House staff.

R: That was rather unfortunate in a way, because there you had two men that really didn't understand each other. That came about through a young fellow named Nelson.

G: Dick Nelson.

R: Yes, Dick Nelson, who had taken a course from Goldman at Princeton. And he felt that Johnson had to have an intellectual around the place, and he couldn't get Walter Prescott Webb, who wasn't going to leave Texas. He recommended Goldman. Goldman should have realized the first day that there was something here that he better think about, because Johnson called him and exerted the old Johnson charm. And Goldman in his book narrates the fact that at the end of the conversation Johnson asked Goldman to write a memorandum on his public relations. Now Eric is a marvelous man; I'm very fond of him, and he's a superb historian. But I don't think he's too good at reading politicians. He should have realized that what that meant was that Johnson didn't know what he did, you know, that Goldman was a historian. "Memo on public relations," good God.

Well, for another man I think Goldman would have been invaluable in the White House, because he had a good sense of contemporary intellectuality. I remember that big fine arts festival that he set up for the White House. That was really an excellent idea, to turn the White House over to--he had sculptures by [Jacques] Lipschitz. Saul Bellow showed up. It was really a rather glorious thing, and the sort of thing that I myself think the White House should do more of. Of course by that time however, the Vietnamese War had become unpopular and you've got a bunch of these artists who absolutely refused to show up, made quite a thing about it. And Johnson blamed Goldman for all that. I don't think he talked to Goldman more than a few times. I got to know Eric very

well when he was there.

G: Was Goldman's role seen as sort of [an Arthur] Schlesinger role?

R: Yes, sort of. Except, you see, Johnson really didn't know what intellectuals do. He got Walter Prescott Webb mad as the devil. I'm sure I've told you about that before.

G: He wanted him to write a speech on foreign policy.

R: Foreign affairs. Walter, who was awfully sharp--Walter was quick--said, "My God, doesn't that man know what I do?" But I think that he had sort of a concept of the intellectual world--historians as people that dug up stories for your speeches, grammarians and litterateurs as people that thought of clever phrases. To him all of this stuff was put together in a speech and it--you of course have seen, have you not, that latest documentary on Johnson and the education programs and all that he did for poverty, that was done by the Library?

G: (Inaudible)

R: Well, the interesting thing about it though, the documentary is much better than I expected it would be. Of course it recommends LBJ highly, but I think he's entitled to that; what the devil, enough nasty things have been said about him, I think he's entitled to have somebody to say this is a saint. But it was interesting to me for two reasons. First of all, all of the pictures they showed of poverty were rural poverty. City poverty was unknown to LBJ; he relied on me for that. And second, the stuff about education: he thought of education entirely, solely, as a means of getting a job. To him the benefit of education was that people could step out and get a good job, become good taxpayers so they could finance more education programs so more people could step out and get good

jobs. And I think that's why he was somewhat baffled by the historians, the philosophers, people of that nature, kind of abstruse types.

If you analyze this documentary, those are the two outstanding things about it.

G: Did he see Goldman at all as a potential chronicler of his presidency?

R: I doubt it. I really doubt it. I think he brought Goldman in the White House the same way a woman will bring a fern plant into her home. It was sort of window dressing. And I think that he saw Schlesinger that way in the Kennedy White House. I don't think he thought that any of these people really had anything to do with the real world and with the problems that he had to resolve. That may be unfair to him, but I don't think so.

G: Walter Jenkins left that year, in the fall of 1964. Tell me about that episode and what you remember about Jenkins.

R: Oh Lord, that was pretty horrible.

G: The President had gone to New York.

R: We were in New York.

G: Al Smith dinner, was that it?

R: I've forgotten what the dinner was. I was the first to know. I think I knew even before he did. Oh, I think the Associated Press contacted me about it, and I checked it out and I discovered Walter had been picked up in that infamous men's room at the Y[MCA] near the Capitol. I called him; he claimed he didn't know anything about it, which may well be, because both Abe Fortas and Clark Clifford made the unparalleled blunder of walking around trying to talk the newspapers out of it. Good God. But all I could do was call the press in and tell them what little I knew of the incident, and that Walter's resignation had

been accepted.

I remember there was a long discussion afterward. I myself wanted to keep Walter in the staff. I think I was the only one that did. I can still recall McGeorge Bundy saying, "Your heart's big, but we just can't have this."

I went to visit Walter in the hospital. He was there with Marge, and thank God, the Washington diocese had a couple of priests that specialized in caring for homosexuals.

Now it's rather strange. Walter was a peculiar man. You somehow never felt that you really knew him. You could be on a first-name basis with him, but I never thought I had completely fathomed him. And I can remember an incident which hadn't occurred to me at the time, a number of years ago, when Walter wasn't at the desk on time in the morning. There was sort of a panic about it, everybody calling around frantically, wanting to know if he'd been in an automobile accident or something like that. And he finally showed up and said when he was driving past the Agriculture Department--they lived out in Virginia at that time--he suddenly felt ill so he stopped, parked his car and went into the first-aid room in the Agriculture Department until he recovered. I realize now that that was probably something of the same sort of thing that happened at the men's room.

Walter himself told me that on that particular night he had no memory of anything after going back into the party. He said what had happened is that he'd left the White House for a while to go to a *Newsweek* party, and that he left the party and suddenly realized that he had forgotten his hat. Well, Walter was of a generation where you were

never separated from your hat. He said he went back to get the hat and the next thing he knew he came to in the police station.

It was a very major blow to Lyndon Johnson. I sometimes think that Walter's loss may ultimately have led to all of his troubles in the presidency. Walter was invaluable to Lyndon Johnson. If you wanted to pick the one man that he absolutely had to have, it was Walter Jenkins, because Walter knew him so well that Walter knew when *not* to do things he was told to do. And also Walter had a much better concept of the staff members and what they were like than Johnson did. You could pull the wool over Johnson's eyes for a very lengthy period of time. He thought all sorts of people were deeply enamored of him who actually hated him, took every chance they could behind his back to put a knife in it.

In one way he really was just a country boy. He could deal with experienced, sharp politicians because he expected them to be experienced and sharp and he knew how to handle it. But a young, fresh-faced kid, boy, all he had to do was moonface a little bit over Lyndon--as long as they told him that Johnson was great--well, Walter saw through all that. And Walter was the one--as long as Walter was around, the staff stayed intact and a lot of the foolish things were not done. Now I think that people that followed Walter--of course he put Moyers in and read that [?] immediately, because Moyers was a Baptist minister, and that sounded real good, to have a Baptist minister. I am told he was actually a Baptist student or something like that, but that's irrelevant.

But then he put in--my words begin to escape me--the guy from Red River who later went with Occidental Petroleum.

G: Marvin Watson.

R: Marvin Watson. Now Watson was an extremely good man, no question about that. Marvin had plenty of ability, but he didn't know Lyndon Johnson. Johnson told him to do something, he did it. Whereas Walter recognized the difference between things that should be done and things that he was told to get done simply because Johnson was blowing off steam. A hell of a lot of things he did--he'd have a sudden spurt or something, he'd have to blow off steam. And he could give some pretty damn silly orders in cases like that. No, I think that history was really changed because of that business with Walter.

G: Was there any consideration early on that there might have been a security problem with Jenkins being compromised?

R: Yes. They started a very thorough check of the whole White House staff. Let me think for a second. It was rather interesting. There had been one case where Johnson was going to hire a man who very definitely was homosexual and made no bones about it, and Walter was the one who blocked it.

G: On what grounds, do you know?

R: Just thought it would hurt Johnson, which at that point it would have. You have to realize, the attitude toward homosexuals now is far different than it was in the 1960s.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XXV