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LAWRENCE E. (LARRY) LEVINSON ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW VII
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LAWRENCE E. LEVINSON

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INTERVIEW VII

DATE: November 2, 1973

INTERVIEWEE: LAWRENCE E. LEVINSON

INTERVIEWER: Joe B. Frantz

PLACE: Mr. Levinson's office, New York City

Tape 1 of 1

L: I'm sitting here on November 2, 1973, and we're all musing about the Watergate and the fate of the presidency and the questions of conflict of interest. We already read in the paper yesterday that President Nixon, in the midst of a major antitrust case, picked up the telephone and called the Deputy Attorney General and told him not to file an appeal. Later that order was countermanded, but it did illustrate presidential involvement in a matter before the courts, which brings me to mind about the philosophy of President Johnson when it came to pending matters before the courts, or before the regulatory agencies. Maybe by way of illustration, although I've said this somewhere before during this odyssey of conversations, Dr. Frantz, that we've been having the last couple of years, Jack Valenti did something that created a tremendous stir at the White House. And judged from today's standards of involvement, I'll let the story tell itself.

There was a little company in Connecticut called the Mite Company, "as mighty as a mite," and they were doing some work for the Navy at the time. They had a Navy contract, and they were having some problems with the contract. Senator [Thomas] Dodd, who at that time was the incumbent senator from Connecticut, sent a letter over to the White House. I don't recall whether it was to the President or whether it was to Jack.

But in any event the letter said, "There's a great little company in Connecticut that's having a little bit of a problem with a Navy contract. We sure would appreciate your looking into the matter." Jack Valenti, answering letters of that magnitude or sort, wrote back to Senator Dodd saying, "Thank you very much for your note on the Mite Corporation. We will have the Pentagon look into the matter." Signed, Jack Valenti.

During the height of the Dodd controversy, Drew Pearson at that time wrote a little column about Dodd's involvement with the Mite Company. At that point Jack, having remembered somewhere in the back of his mind that this matter had crossed his desk, got the files out and I would say broke into a cold sweat when he saw his letter.

F: He could see his name next.

L: He could see his name next. So I don't know whether he kind of fessed up to the President or said that it was something that he wanted to warn the President about, that he might see this letter in the Drew Pearson column the next day because they had gotten all of Dodd's files. That letter obviously was in Dodd's files. Remember, all Jack did was refer the matter back to the department, but he did indicate that it was coming from the White House in response to a congressional inquiry.

The President saw that, and he literally went into the ceiling and into orbit. I think Jack said it was the worst moment of his life at the White House. He did it innocently, and he really didn't know anything about the contract. He was just trying to get the thing into the proper governmental agency, when obviously the ironclad rule would have been that you pick up the phone and you suggest, "Well, this is a matter you'd better discuss with the Pentagon. We don't get involved in those things."

As a result of that, what I would see as a seemingly innocuous, innocent, unwillful, cooperative kind of thing, we put out a policy statement. It was very sharp, saying that in no circumstances would we ever discuss--any White House official--in any form, matter, shape, color, right, or anything else, with any agency of the government or any department of the government any pending matter before that agency of government, period. The President wanted to run the cleanest administration that he could and insisted on that high standard of non-involvement. As a matter of fact, I can say to you that when Ramsey Clark filed the major cases against IBM and I guess one other major antitrust case in the last days of the administration, I would say that that was done as a surprise. We never even knew about it, which goes to show you the wall of separation the President set out.

F: Larry, this has intrigued me. Johnson got by with no major scandal in a hyperactive administration that went off in eighteen directions, as you know, so that just on sheer percentage he should have had one. He has got that tremendous reputation as a wheeler-dealer, and yet I'm sure that his opposition then and his successors since have looked deeply to find something, for there seems to be a certain amount of, "Well, we're not the first ones who did that" attitude.

Were you lucky? Did you take extraordinary precautions? I know you've got to have a certain amount of luck. You can't keep an old IRS boy from down in Savannah, Georgia, from suddenly deciding to play the game his own way. But how did you keep that from happening? Or were you that good at covering up?

L: No, I don't think it was that. I think you've got to look at the quality of the people on the White House staff that would tend to deal in these issues. The White House counsel at the time I was there was Lee White, who as you know came out of a background with the Kennedy Administration on the Hill. Lee was what I would call a very practical, careful lawyer, really one of the very best, with a great deal of judgment. Harry McPherson succeeded to his job, and Harry, of course, again was the same kind of a guy.

F: Harry's got a strong moralistic streak.

L: Very, very strongly moralistic. And Joe [Califano] and I, I guess, approached the problem the same way. Those issues would naturally funnel through to some of us. There may have been things that went on, obviously, but at least in the immediate realm of what I would call the legal personnel at the White House, we were very, very tough on this thing. I must say there were many, many instances where an Arthur Krim, for example, would pick up the phone and say, "Hey, can you find out what the status of this proceeding is? Would you do that?" You'd get some calls from the Hill and things like that.

F: I would have thought, for instance, every Texan in the business world would have called Johnson at one time or another, or a Johnson person, and said, "Look, we've got this that we don't get any satisfaction on." Because things do hang up for one reason or another. "Now then, let's get some movement, and how are you going to do it?"

L: Let me say this. I can't remember any pressure being put on us by the President or anybody to ever point out the status of a pending proceeding in the Justice Department or any of the agencies, the FCC, FTC, *et cetera*. The FCC obviously the President was very

careful of because of his own interests in television. And the SEC, we had great dealings with the SEC, but they were largely in the area of formulating legislative proposals.

Never once did I ever pick up the phone and ask Manny Cohen or somebody else, "How is this proceeding coming along?" I think we all realized that it's more trouble than it's worth. I don't remember anything being pushed on us to, "Go find out."

I do remember one very important aspect, that has just been written about in the newspapers since. In the waning days of the administration the Justice Department was about to bring a major proceeding against the automotive manufacturers for what they considered to be a monopolistic domination of the pollution research business in the country. I think they had kind of gotten some information that they'd all gotten together and decided they were going to stifle research on pollution control devices. The Justice Department was going to do something, hit them with an antitrust proceeding. Lloyd Cutler, who has done a lot of yeoman work for the President on the Kerner Commission and the staff, and he was always available for consultation, also happened to represent some of the automobile companies. Tom Mann, who was also a friend of the President's, as you know, came to be president of the AMA, the Automobile Manufacturers Association. Lloyd Cutler came over to see Joe and me, said he wanted to come over on a personal legal matter, because we had known him very well.

F: Lloyd was almost staff. He was second cousin or something.

L: Right. He was always working on questions. You know, there were stories and statements about him becoming secretary of commerce or attorney general, something like that. He was always being considered a first-rate, absolutely terrific guy. He came

in and explained that he was here on behalf of some automobile companies and that he felt that Ramsey Clark was doing the absolutely wrong thing, that instead of promoting pollution research it would stifle it completely. We said, "Lloyd, you know this is not a White House matter. We don't deal with antitrust matters. We've got some study groups studying the general policy of antitrust, but we never get into cases and controversies and won't do it." He said, "Will you pick up the phone and call Ramsey Clark and see whether I can get in to see him?" I said, "Well, if I do that"-- thinking back on the Mite episode that Mr. Valenti ran afoul of--"it looks to me like you're coming over under our auspices. That wouldn't make any difference to Ramsey, because he'd probably throw you out a lot faster if that happened. Why don't you call him and make the appointment yourself?"

I think Lloyd was trying to get himself into the Justice Department with some kind of White House blessing. We said, "No, we just can't do that." The meeting broke up, and he was very friendly. He called me in a couple of days, and he said: "You know, I've been thinking about that, and I really wish you would go ahead and call Ramsey, because I can't make any headway. I wish you would call him at least to let me go meet him." I said, "I'm sorry, Lloyd, I'm not going to do it. Because we've got no business being involved in this kind of thing, and we're not going to do it."

I cite the Mite case and this auto pollution research as I guess a kind of an attitude that we all had on the staff, that these proceedings had to take their course in their own way without any interference. What we did at the White House on these issues, on antitrust for example, was we had at least one task force operating on general antitrust

policies. "What should antitrust policies be?" "Should the Sherman Act be changed?"

"How do you handle bigness? How do you handle the trend toward conglomeration?"

We had some studies done. But never, never would we get into a pending controversy on a matter.

F: Did the President show much interest in this sort of thing?

L: I don't remember ever discussing antitrust with the President, except that on our menu of things to be looked at in the economic area he thought that somewhere we ought to be looking at the antitrust laws, because the Sherman Act was passed in 1890 and the Clayton Act first was in 1914, and it was re-amended in 1950. There was some concern about the growing trend toward concentration, the conglomerate way, which when we got out of office Mr. [Richard W.] McClaren, the new assistant attorney general for antitrust, started to make a crusade out of. But we wanted to have those questions examined. They were very vital to the strength of business in this country and small business operations and how they would fare, but particularly [to] the impact on our ability to compete overseas, saying that if we were really hamstrung with archaic antitrust laws we may be really losing a competitive edge overseas. So we wanted those looked at.

There was also some concern about the size of corporations like a General Motors or an AT&T. Are they too big? Should they be broken up? Should the industry be deconcentrated? and so forth. So those general antitrust policy questions we would have examined. They were vital to business and the economy. But when it came to justiciable matters, whether a case should be brought or not brought, when a case was brought, whether it should be appealed, we never would get near it, never.

F: I suppose something like, without casting any blame, this current ITT situation, none of you would have ever moved on that just for fear of incurring the President's wrath?

L: I think that was certainly a large part of it. Also, when an appointed official of a department has been given a presidential charter and the appointment has been confirmed by the Congress and the Senate, he should be doing his job on a case-by-case basis, without any interference from the White House. If there are matters of general antitrust policy to be discussed, without regard to specific cases, that was another matter. Once you got into a specific case and controversy and a set of facts, it's terrible policy in business to become involved. It only hurts you; it never helps you. You always end up hurting the guy you're trying to help more when you're trying to help him. I think Mr. [Harold] Geneen is finding out that. You see what the consequences are. I can't tell you that we ran a clean-as-a-hound's-tooth administration. I don't know whether in the banking areas and charters, things like that, somebody might take a look at this and that. But I've got to say that we had a pretty ironclad rule of keeping away, at arm's length.

F: Now everybody, for either pride or personal profit, would like to think he has a friend in the White House, and he'd like to brag about it and so forth. How do you brush a man off who wants to do favors for you so that you don't lose him as a constituent, he talks about "those arrogant s.o.b.s up there" and turns his back on you, and at the same time you don't get yourself obligated?

L: I'll give you an example, a very interesting example. During one of the Medicare, or Medicaid revisions, there was a question as to whether podiatry would be allowed as a reimbursable expense, the argument being that a lot of old folks had trouble with their

feet. The medical profession kind of looks at podiatry as a strange breed of whatever you call it.

F: A little on the fringe side.

L: Mrs. Johnson was very much interested in podiatry and felt that from her own experience, the people she had known in her family--when you get old you get a lot of bunions and feet problems and things like that. The podiatry association had long been trying to get coverage under the Medicaid and Medicare. I had a call one day, and I can't remember the fellow's name, it sounded like Dr. [Charles] Turchin, or something like that, who said he was calling me because somebody in the White House had given him my name as the one to talk to on getting podiatry included in Medicare. He said he'd like to come over and see me. He said, "Would you like to have lunch with me at Paul Young's?" or something like that. I very rarely went out to lunch at all, because normally when you go out to lunch would be the time the President would call you. Then he'd find you'd be out, and he'd want to know why.

F: "What are you doing out eating when I need you?"

L: "What are you doing?" Right. "Who are you seeing? Probably some reporter that you shouldn't be talking to." So I rarely ever got out to eat.

When he invited me out to lunch I said, "Why don't you come over here and let me know what's on your mind?" He came over, and he talked about the science of podiatry and colleges that trained podiatrists and how they operated and so forth. I said, "Why don't you send me a memorandum on it, and I'll see what we can do." I had known really, I guess off the side, that Mrs. Johnson had really sent him in, that somebody had

talked to Mrs. Johnson and it had come through that way. So I wanted to be sure and be on my best behavior.

We kicked the thing around, and I asked him a lot of questions. I suppose what I should have done, instead of getting tied up with him at the White House, would have been to send him over to HEW to talk to Wilbur Cohen, but he was a very engaging guy.

By God, one day I did accept an invitation to go out and have lunch with him at Paul Young's. He said that on the basis of a nice personal friendship he'd treat me to lunch and all of that, and we'd talk about podiatry and so forth. I went back and we had the thing reviewed by HEW. I think by and large the thing was included in one of the Medicare-Medicaid revisions. But I did it mainly because of the merits of the thing and the way the guy came in. I would say that was about the furthest limit of any way I'd ever gone with anybody who said he had a friend at the White House. We were pretty much too busy.

F: Did the President ever give the staff any kind of homey advice on where they ought to eat and whom they ought not to eat with and that sort of thing?

L: If he had his choice we'd all be eating at the White House mess every day. He was always getting reports somewhere that Califano and McPherson or DeVier [Pierson] was sitting over at the Sans Souci eating with [Art] Buchwald or somebody else.

F: In some ways Washington is the world's smallest town.

L: He'd really be good, kind of always after the fact, "I guess you're too busy worrying about your own stomach to worry about the nation's business, eating with those reporters." And I would say most of those meetings, dinners or lunches if you will, were

really designed to get out an interpretation of what the President was doing to the press, which you couldn't do in the news briefings or things like that.

F: That's one thing I wondered.

L: We weren't trying to get our names in the paper.

F: You don't want to wall yourself off.

L: We did it, but I would say it was done more in keeping with trying to interpret what was going on than it was in trying to get anybody's name in the paper.

F: Did you ever get the feeling that the press was trying to gut the President, or that it was just being its usual critical self?

L: I think the press had a divided mentality. Vietnam obviously was a tremendous issue with the press. When it came to the domestic programs, we had always been getting kind of a snide remark that, "If you're spending all your money in Vietnam you can't spend it domestically. Why are you doing it this way?" I would say that, of course, George [Christian] and Tom Johnson are a lot better qualified than I am to answer this.

But to give you an idea, I came to Washington maybe six months after the Republicans had gotten in, and was eating in the basement in the dining room of the Hay-Adams Hotel. It's right across from Lafayette Park. That's where a lot of the press go during the lunch hour. I ran into Helen Thomas and Fran Lewine, and we sat down and we chatted a little bit about old times. One of the girls said, "Gosh, we just wish you were all back. It was so much warmer, so much more of a human element to it. It was always all full of wonderful surprises. It was kind of an exciting life. Now everything has been fixed up for us down there, we've got more room, but it really isn't as exciting

and interesting the way it used to be." Of course, now I'm sure they've got plenty to write about.

I think what was interesting was the President's view of the staff dealing with the press, which was--I don't really know whether he meant it or not, he said it but I don't think he really meant it--"You fellows are just looking to get your name in the paper. You're doing it to promote yourself. You work for me, and by God, I don't want you talking to people." We said, "Well, we're only trying to explain your program. We're really doing it for you." You never knew whether he'd buy that. He would get a little piqued at times. Once one of the fellows was doing a story for the *New York Times*, the *Times* Magazine, on Califano. It was Pat Anderson or somebody. He had gone to Okamoto to try to get a picture of Califano and the President--the famous picture of Joe whispering in LBJ's ear at the cabinet table. The President found out about the story, and he wouldn't let Okie give him the picture, release the picture. Some picture did come out; I guess it was one that had appeared before.

F: Probably one they had in their own morgue.

L: Something like that. But he wouldn't, on the argument that, "I like my staff people to be anonymous." It was interesting, because once news got out that I was on the staff my local paper called me one day, the *Long Island Daily Press*, or something from Queens. There was a reporter named Tony Viglietta or somebody like that, who kind of followed our Washington beat. He said, "I'd sure like to come over and see you about your life at the White House and what it's like to work over there." Viglietta his name was. I said, "Well, I don't really think I have time to see you." He said, "How do you like working at

the White House? What high school did you go to? Where did you go to college? Where do your parents live?" All these personal facts. "How do you like working at the White House?" I said, "It's really the greatest opportunity a young man can have. To work for this President is exciting, and LBJ is a dynamo. He works twenty-four hours a day and keeps us working just as hard. He's really doing everything for the country that he can." I tried to really slant it on him, on the President.

Mother called me about a week later and said there was a terrific article in the *Long Island Daily Press*, big headlines on the back page about "Long Islander Says LBJ the Greatest." And there was a picture of me there. Somehow, I don't know how, where, nor when, the President got this thing, and he sent it back to me with a note that said, "I'm not very happy about this." That's all it said, "I'm not very happy about this."

F: You weren't either.

L: No. I wasn't happy when I got the note. But throughout the interview with the fellow on the phone, I was really trying to build up the President, and it ended up being more where I lived and where I went to high school and how I was in the White House and what my duties were and all of that. But I thought the headlines would [please him]. He didn't like that. I always felt that it was that dichotomy of why wouldn't he really want to give--our argument was that if people write about the staff they were really writing about the President, because it reflects the judgment of his picking some good people. I can never fathom that. Maybe you've got the answer to it, to why he took the attitude that he did, and he wouldn't release Joe's picture or something like that.

F: No. It's very intriguing, because he had articulate and practiced people that I think would have done a good fronting job for him. I think one of the problems of the current administration has been that they've had a bunch who have sort of grunted and run communiques. But no one ever told them anything; they never told anyone anything.

L: I think our philosophy, too, was that it was a lot better for us to meet with the press without anybody from the press office around. Because that's kind of like when you sit down and interview a chief executive of a company that's got a PR guy there. It just doesn't look right.

But I think on balance we got along very well with the press. I think the press liked the staff very much. I used to see some of them socially, Bob Pierpoint for example. We used to meet him at parties all the time. You get to be friends. I respect the press. That's one of the things that we always lose sight of, in a way. These guys really work hard for a living. They don't make a lot of money; they're always writing under deadlines, or most of them I should say.

F: And there's no eight-to-five quality about it at all.

L: They're always traveling around on a moment's notice.

F: Particularly with President Johnson.

L: That's right; he'd take off. But I'd say most of the reporters had a basically good leaning toward the President's domestic programs. Vietnam is what really got [him in trouble]. I would say that they were very much in tune with what the President was doing domestically. They are liberals. We didn't have this kind of press intimidation the way the current administration is practicing it.

One very interesting thing about the President, talking about the airwaves and the press and the television generally. Frank Stanton, as you know, was always involved in presidential activities. He respected Stanton and had him on all kinds of advisory committees and working on the Library, things like that. Bob Kintner came out of another major network to give some help. One of the things we always felt, though, was still lacking--maybe this administration overdid it and maybe we underdid it--was the ability to communicate, at least interpret what was going on, which is a very tough job. I remember sometimes we operated like a little small town when we really were in a big city. The President was very worried about his image. People were telling him that he wasn't coming over properly and all of that, that he had to do something, he really needed some good advice. He wanted to bring somebody in to help him as a PR consultant.

I'm sitting in Joe's office late one night--it always seems to be late one night--and we were talking about something that we got involved in. Somebody from the press office came in with a folder. It was a secret resumé of somebody that either the President or Christian wanted us to look at for a potential PR adviser to the President. I figured we'd probably be looking at the likes of somebody from the big ad agencies or some major executive of a network. We looked at the thing, and it was a retired Navy captain somewhere in Springfield, Virginia. I don't know whether he wrote the President a letter, saying, "Your image is terrible, and I can promote it for you. Here's my background." Joe and I looked at this thing, and we said, "Oh, my gosh, we recognize the problem, but this isn't the guy who's going to help him at all." But it goes to show you the fact that we

were not modernized in the way of presenting to the public, [with] an array of techniques that you could present, what he was doing.

F: Did anyone ever suggest the fireside approach?

L: Oh, yes.

F: Because he could have come in here to Gulf and Western in a nest of maybe antagonistic executives, and I'd almost put my money down that in thirty minutes he'd have them eating out of his hand.

L: Yes. The President always came across in the flesh a lot better than he did on the tube. We were asking ourselves a lot of reasons why that happened. First of all, I believe he really did suffer from mediocre personnel at the White House in that area. It's not easy to condemn people, and I don't often do that, but I feel that as president he was entitled to the very best of advice. I think some of the fellows we brought in there to help him did no more than fiddle around with his glasses and worry about the lighting and all of that. Nobody really said, "Look, you get a movie director in here to tell you how to act and how to behave. You come over like a wooden balloon. You're too stiff, and you look like somebody's old grandfather. You're too lecturing, you don't rehearse."

Valenti tried to get him to do better. Jack would go over his speeches and he'd underscore the key words for the President to emphasize and try to make him come over a little bit better. I thought that was really one of our fundamental failings. The President could be so eloquent and magnificent in a group, in the flesh, and yet somewhere over the transmission wires something happened. We pondered that problem a great deal. It wasn't really something I particularly worried about, because I had so

many other things to worry about, but I'm sure that people were concerned with it. Bob Kintner came in, and he was supposed to improve the image. I think instead of improving the image he made the image worse, because he himself didn't comport himself in many ways.

F: I rather gather Bob came in when he was basically over the hill.

L: When Bob was over the hill, yes. Which shows you what could be done. It's interesting: Two things which show you what could be done. One was when we were in the midst of this whole tax controversy, and this was in late 1967, about getting that surcharge through. The people were saying, "Mr. President, you come over terribly. You ought to get out and get away from that monster lectern you've got. Hook that mike around your tie, don't have any notes, and stand up. Walk around the stage a little bit." The President always liked to gesture and walk around. "You're standing there and you've got this thing."

So we had one whale of a press conference, which we called the "open mike" press conference. I don't know whether you remember that. He strode up and down. I remember watching this. I went over to the Executive Office Building, as we were working on a speech for the next day. Jack McNulty, one of the speech writers who is now with General Motors, and I were watching this press conference. The country was certainly in not all that great shape--1967, Vietnam and the tax situation and all of that. The President came on and was just magnificent. I remember we said, "Boy, that's something those Republicans are really going to have to contend with in 1968. How are they going to beat the guy?" The strange thing about it is that he did it once, and he did

so well, and he never did it again. Why he never did it again I don't know. But that was his style.

F: He was sensitive enough, I would have thought he would have felt the communication that was going across.

L: I don't know why he never did it again. Everybody urged him, and he finally did it. I guess maybe he thought he didn't really do that well. But as we saw it, it was sensational. That was one example.

The second example was that he was a good friend of Harding Lawrence, the chairman of Braniff. And I think at the time Lawrence had married Mary Wells, who was in an advertising agency, or coming out of one and starting her own. Mary Wells was one of the most inventive, creative, exciting people around. She was really something, aside from being very attractive.

F: All that and good looks, too.

L: Right. She got together somehow with LBJ, and he said, "I've got a couple of very important bill signings, Mary, and one of them is the minimum wage increase. Look what they give me here to say." He showed some speech that the boys had probably killed themselves on, and she looked at it and, "Well, Mr. President, I think we can clean this up a little bit. Let me work on it a little bit." So she got off somewhere. Her copy that comes out of Wells-Green Agency, stuff she did before she got into her own agency, was very creative and much the way the President liked to have his own speeches written, very short, punchy, one-line, two-line sentences, just two-line paragraphs, very patchy.

She took, I think, either Hardesty's or somebody's minimum wage speech and converted it into what I call kind of a catchy Volkswagen ad for the minimum wage bill.

Let me take you back and give you a better example than the minimum wage bill.

She did that, but she did the auto safety bill. That was one she did. I remember Hardesty worked around the clock on the thing. He turned out draft after draft until he was satisfied that he had a good one and proudly marched it in there. The bill signing was the next day. Bob was looking forward to getting up the next morning and having the thing returned to him. You know the pride you get when the President would say, "Okay, put it on the cards." It didn't come back. Hardesty called and said, "What happened? Is the President going to give the speech?" I said, "Bob, I don't really know. The bill signing is at eleven o'clock, and we don't know." Then [Charles] Maguire rushes in and says, "They're putting something on the cards now, and they want you to look at it and make sure it's right." I started reading the thing, and it was a hundred per cent different, like another ghostly hand had written it. It wasn't Hardesty's speech at all; it was something else. Bob's speech began with something like, "We're here today to witness a very significant milestone in the long history of consumer relations," something like that. And this thing started just like this. It went something like, "We're here today to stop death, 50,000 on the highways [compared with] 15,000 in Vietnam." That's just the way it started, making the comparison that we lose more on the highways than we do in the war. "Yes, 50,000 on the highway and 15,000 on the battlefield. We're trying to stop the death on the battlefield, if they would only say, 'Yes.' That's something we can't control, because we're waiting for that. But we certainly can begin to control those

50,000." She did such a beautiful [job] and he loved it. He thought it was the best thing he ever had. It was just so sensational. He enjoyed himself. He really loved it. You go back and you take a look at that highway bill signing. That's Mary Wells right down to the bottom, all the way through, very clear, crisp.

F: Could he not hold on to her?

L: She did that. Then she did the minimum wage bill. The President was trying to get the flavor of how the Depression was terrible on people and how now we are in the prosperity of the late sixties, and there are a lot of people who never shared in it. She wrote a wonderful minimum wage thing. She said that, "In the thirties when you were poor, you were one of the boys. But in the sixties when you're poor, you're all alone." Something like that. She really captured it beautifully. She wrote that, "While we're all enjoying prosperity, there are those that really need to have a piece of that pie, too. It's the laundress that does your shirt, gets up at four o'clock in the morning to do your shirts, and it's the man who cleans the bathrooms in the hotel, and it's the Mexican-American farmer who's hoeing up stuff for five hours [before you even get up]." She had a little catalog of people it would cover for the first time, that the bill would encompass--the laundresses and others. He loved that.

The next thing that happened was, the boys were all in a total resentment because she had come in. Nobody saw her, because nobody knew where she worked. They were sending drafts, and she'd take the drafts and take whatever the facts were out of them and then she'd write it and the President would love it. Each one was getting better and better. The boys were there, and they couldn't beat her because she was so good. She

just had the right touch. I'd never seen her. I don't know where she worked. All I know is that every morning speeches would come back and they were great to read.

F: Kind of like they'd been stuck in a secret chute somewhere.

L: Yes, somewhere. Our job was just to make sure they were right, factually right. I never saw her. All we knew was those speeches were coming out. The next thing we knew, we picked up the "Periscope" column in Newsweek, and there was an item in there: "Guess who LBJ's new speech writer is? Could it be lovely, blonde Mary Wells?" After that appeared, nobody ever heard from her again. It was over. She never wrote another speech, never did anything else. I can't tell you whether one of the boys leaked it, knowing that that would be a sure way to get her out, or whether she mentioned to someone, "I'm in there writing speeches for the President." Nobody knows. But once that appeared it was the kiss of death, out.

F: It could have been one of those cocktail party remarks, "I've got to go home and write a speech for the President."

L: Yes.

F: Now then, the President had been a speech teacher and a debate coach in his brief teaching career; he'd been a college editor. Did he have an idea that he was pretty good? Was that his problem, that he could write as well as any of you so-and-so's?

L: Yes, I would say that he had a great feel and flair for the language and was a pretty good writer.

One of the things I've always enjoyed was when you'd send in a message, he would take that wonderful felt-tipped pen of his and he'd make changes. He'd have this

wonderful type of handwriting that was so easy to read. It was kind of graceful, long bits underlined, such a familiar kind of thing. He'd edit sentences, or he'd write up some little section on the side. It always used to kill us--well, it didn't kill us--but it always used to amuse us that when the message was released and the news guys would write a little precis of it--we'd look at the wire service to see how they would handle the message--I would say invariably the thing they quoted in their lead was something he had out in himself. It was almost uncanny. He had such a feel for what the heart of the matter was. It would be very interesting to go back to the Library and take a look at all of the draft messages that have been preserved, things that were sent in to him with his comments on it, to see the quality of LBJ as an editor. He was a really good editor, very, very good.

F: It might be a good exercise for somebody who is interested in editing.

L: Just in terms of how a president is an editor. It would be a nice highlight, and I'm sure you would get some interesting vignettes out of that.

F: Did you get the feeling that he kind of had a hands-off attitude toward Ramsey [Clark]?

L: He used to say to me, "I can't get him to do anything. He's the most independent, stubborn guy I've ever known in life. I feel like sometimes I work for him. Ramsey won't give me the time of day. He's a bright young man, but there are times when I just don't know." And Ramsey was just exactly that way. He was independent.

F: I've rather picked up the notion that whereas Johnson would throw his weight onto anybody, where it came to Ramsey he just kind of stood off and waited for Ramsey to move before he'd--

L: Ramsey was unmovable and wouldn't take any direction. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad, but he was very tough. We always had good relations with him in terms of we'd pick up the phone and say, "General," and kind of chat. We knew him when he was deputy. The first contact I had with Ramsey was when Watts broke. We'd only been on the White House staff for one month when Watts exploded, and after Watts calmed down and quieted down the President sent a task force into Watts to try to find out what we could do to repair the neighborhoods, and so forth. Ramsey went as the head of that task force.

I remember he and I talked over the phone. The first time the name and the voice comes to my mind was that he was in Los Angeles, and he was saying, "We've got to get the housing people to move faster down here. We've got to get the Labor Department to move." I don't think at that time that I ever realized how totally complicated and confused the organization of the government was, in terms of the overlap of the housing, the Labor Department, OEO.

But one thing I do remember about Ramsey: He came back from Watts and we had him brief the press on what he found and what programs we had instituted in an emergency way to cope with the problem of people needing places to live, and jobs, and food, and emergency repairs, and what have you. He came back with more than just a report on the emergency. He came back with a report on what he thought causes riots, which was way before the Kerner Commission got started on the thing.

He came in with a chart, I will always remember, which was an overlay of about six different maps--well, one map with about six overlays on it. He told the press he had

gone to Watts and they were doing the following, in a six-point, nine-point program. Somebody said, "Aren't you just rewarding rioters?" And he said, "No, we're trying to save lives, help people eat. There are very deep currents in these things, not all of which we understand. But one thing we can understand is this easel." He said, "Here's a map of Los Angeles. Here in the first overlay is where the incidences of highest illiteracy is." There was a little black dot somewhere. "Here is another map with the incidence of highest unemployment." First dot and then a second dot go like this. "Here is a map of the incidence of crime and juvenile delinquency." Bango, right there again, the highest. By that time the little specks began to appear. "Here's a rate of such and such." And by God, they all clustered. He had those five charts, and then he pulled a final chart down and said, "That's Watts." [He] demonstrated the fact that these riots were probably very deep-seated in their origins, and things finally reached a frustration or boiling point where they erupted.

F: Almost irresistible logic in it.

L: Yes. And sooner or later he had taken every city in the United States and done the same thing. You could have said, "Here is where it's going to happen." That's how I remember Ramsey, the first incident. I remember him even then as a man very vitally concerned with humanity, with a reverence for the kind of quality and dignity in humanity that people ought to have. Ramsey was always very concerned about those deeper currents in American life, that children have a right to grow up in peace and men have a right to have a good job and people have a right to privacy, and that the criminal justice system should not be oppressive. If some people get let go, at least the system should be fair in terms of

confessions and non-police brutality. That was picked up by some as being very soft and very liberal and very not in keeping with this kind of century. But others, I think, really understood what he was saying, that in the broadest context we're all part of the same problem, and we've got to solve it. It amused me very much in the rhetoric of the 1968 campaign when Nixon kept saying, "The first thing we're going to do is get a new attorney general." Which he had to do anyway, because he sure wasn't going to keep Ramsey on.

F: I'd like to have seen Ramsey with Nixon.

L: Or whether Ramsey would even stay on, right. That I remember brought down the greatest applause, "We're going to get a new attorney general." Of course, he was using Ramsey and law and order. Of course, Ramsey was used unfortunately as a symbol of black--I don't mean black liberation, but [Nixon said] that Ramsey was soft on all of these things. He was the fellow who had created all of these problems. He was permissive; he was all for the blacks and for the poor, and he wanted to let all the criminals run around free.

F: He's not going to shoot anybody for looting.

L: That's right, the looting statement and things like that.

F: I would rather gather that the President felt almost as strongly as Ramsey on wiretapping.

L: That's true. I've always asked myself why he was such a bug on bugging. I didn't know whether that might have stemmed from the Baker episode, where people were saying, "Well, the Revenue Service has got them under surveillance." I don't know where it came from. I don't know.

Somebody from the *Reader's Digest* was in doing a piece on General Haig, and he asked me about bugging. I showed him a message that the President sent up in 1967 on bugging, where he said that he wanted bugging stopped. In fact, he told the agencies of the government to stop bugging administratively some time around 1965 or 1966, I can't remember that. Then he would only permit bugging under one circumstance, where there was some kind of immediate threat to national security. And then you'd have to get a court order if you had time. But all other situations, even when you're dealing with murders and things like that, he would not permit bugging.

He sent up a very tough anti-wiretap bill to the Congress. He did all he could administratively to stop it in the government. I think he felt very strongly that privacy was very valuable and that the gains you get out of bugging were not sufficient to warrant the intrusion in people's bedrooms and lives and things like that. I remember that message. I had come back one day and had picked up a book that Doug Cater had left downstairs, and I was reading it on the way home and making some notes to put in a message. I ran across a quote from Justice Brandeis, which said that the right of privacy is one of the rights most basic to civilized man, some such quote. And I put that in the message. We did a little section on bugging.

You remember when we talked about how the President edits. You go back and you look at that note, and you see in the President's own hand he says, "We don't want to turn America into a nation of suspicion and bugging, where every martini glass might contain a bug." There was some very colorful language in there; "buggers" and "snoopers" and things like that. That bill was sent up, and then Mr. McClellan got very

aggravated about it, because he felt that this was a license to let organized crime get away with too many things. I'm sure the hardliners and the FBI came up there and told them, "Oh, my God, LBJ has put us out of business. We're not going to get the goods on anybody." So the Safe Streets Act in 1968, when it was passed, had a much broader, permissive wiretap bill. When that bill came over the President was very excited about it, and he was almost thinking about vetoing the bill. But the bill had so much else in it that he wanted, grants for the local police departments and things like that, that we compromised it out by saying that, "Even though Congress is giving us the authority in these matters other than national security to wiretap, I'm not going to use it. I'm directing my attorney general not to use those authorities." And we didn't. Then of course when [John] Mitchell came in and afterwards, "Well, the President had this authority all along, but he didn't want to use it. We're going to use it," and so forth.

I can't tell you where the basic attitude stemmed from against bugging, but it was very strong, very deep-seated. We got always very explicit directions, policy guidance on this thing from the President not to go beyond that which was almost essential for the survival of the country. Other than that, it ought to be stopped.

F: Ever since the Watergate taping revelations came out, I've been periodically called by some newsman wanting to know about Johnson's taping of messages. What do you know about it?

L: I had always felt myself that there was a lot being recorded, of what I really didn't know, except that I used to remember seeing Mildred Stegall typing an awful lot out of a tape machine. She was kind of taking things down. When I came down to Austin to help do

some of the research on the book, on the memoirs--I was really organizing the research material--I said, "You know, we still don't have it yet. I know there has got to be more. I know that we probably could get a little more salty anecdotal material into this stuff. I've gone through all the papers; there's a lot of good stuff." So I went to Dorothy Territo. I said, "All right, Dorothy," and just out of complete blue said, "Dorothy, what about those tapes?" just not knowing any more. She looked at me and said, "There are no tapes." I said, "Come on, Mildred was typing all that stuff. I've got to get better material for the book, especially when the President picked up the phone and called Wilbur Mills. It would be wonderful to say he talked to Mills and all that." "Well, there isn't any such thing," she kept saying. At that point I was convinced in my own mind, having just reached out almost like the way they got Alex Butterfield, that some things may have been taped. Later on when we were working on the thing, suddenly we began to get some more anecdotal material. Although I could never tell you, and I would certainly strongly doubt that taping went on at a level and a magnitude of what went on here, certainly there were selective tapes made. I would say that those tapes probably went into situations like this: number one; when Vance and Throckmorton were dispatched to Detroit that terrible day and that night when Romney had called for federal troops, we were on the phone with him. Vance was there observing the situation, and it was very critical. Proclamations were ready to be issued declaring civil insurrection and that the troops would be forthcoming. I think there the President, when it came to the reports, wanted to have on record the fact that Vance had reported to him that the situation was

out of control and called for [troops]. I would suspect matters like that were recorded. I don't know. This, again, is just a kind of a suspicion.

I would also suspect in a way that when the President talked to the military about target selection and not bombing the Russian ships and said, "Do you understand that you're not to go near Haiphong?" and they said, "Yes, sir," that that was recorded. So that if anything happened he'd have a tape showing it. I would imagine that in matters like that, where very critical national security decisions hung in the balance, either on an instruction from the President or on a representation of a set of conditions, that those were either recorded or taken down on some Dictaphone. I don't believe there were a lot of them. I think they were selective.

F: You get enough of that in your own family relationships. Where you said something and you'll swear you said something, and your wife says, "No, you didn't, you said something else."

L: I think the President was saying that if some of these guys sank a Russian ship in Haiphong harbor, and they said, "Well, nobody told us we couldn't," he'd have it pinned down, "By God, this is what I told you." Whether the other party knew it was being recorded or not, I don't know. But I would certainly say that there was certainly no continuing transmission belt of tapes. I think it was highly selective, highly confined to national security instances and things like that, and for good reason, good and valid reasons.

F: Did you work on open housing?

L: By that you mean the Fair Housing bill?

F: Yes.

L: Yes.

F: That was a long fight. What did you do, just wear it down?

L: I think on that, if I can recall what happened, was that open housing had come up. We had very major decisions on open housing. One was whether to do it by executive order, and the other was to do it by statute. One of the great debates within the administration of the Justice Department was, "How should the President act?" The Justice Department felt that, given his control over savings and loan institutions and over the sources of mortgage credit which finance these types of housing and through FHA, he had sufficient leverage to require as a condition of every loan, pending or existing, that the money must go to nondiscriminatory housing. He got a tremendous legal opinion out of the Justice Department saying, "You've got plenty of authority to do it by executive order." In fact, we were already going in that direction in 1966.

When it was presented to the President he pondered an awfully long time. He knew it was the right thing to do, but he decided, "No." This is interesting for a man who was accused in Vietnam of transgressing the authority of Congress. I thought that was just really absurd. But to show you what posture he put the Congress in, he said, "No, I won't do that. I may have the authority to sign this Executive Order, but I won't do it. I want the Congress with me on this thing. This is a very major national issue, and if we can convince them to do it, that's well and good. I may have the authority, but I want legislation."

So we proposed legislation, and it didn't go anywhere. It got kind of buttonholed and stopped, and then there were overtones on model cities, that this was fair housing in the sky, the whole thing. Finally of course what happened, as you know, is that using the tremendous emotional aftermath of the Martin Luther King assassination, he used that as a way to get the fair housing. He sensed the mood of the country to do it, and he got the bill through.

Something that was interesting, that day the Fair Housing Bill was signed Middleton and I were sitting in the Executive Office Building in Harry's office writing a signing statement, under tremendous pressure, because Califano was in his office, and the President was calling every minute, "Where's my speech?" He would pick up the phone and call me, and I'd say, "Joe, for crying out loud, leave us alone, will you? We're trying to write this darn thing. Don't call us every other minute!" He said, "Well, bring over what you have."

I said, "I don't have anything yet." He said, "Do you realize we've only got another hour? The President has been calling me. We've got to have this. We're inviting people in." I said, "Don't worry, Joe. We'll have it." He said, "Well, bring it over as soon as you get a page." He just got frantic.

So Harry and I were sitting there, and by that time we'd developed a pretty good kind of Kaufman-and-Hart relationship. Because we could think just about the way the President would want to put it. I remember Harry saying something like, "This was the end of a long journey that began back in 1865," something very eloquent. Then we got that. Then I remember dashing across from the EOB back to my office in the West Wing

with the draft. Joe would take it, and he'd read it and run it into the President. The President would send it out with changes; the girls were retyping; then the second page would come over, and everything was going. Then finally the thing was put together, and I went downstairs to watch it on television. You know, it was televised.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon and there he was signing it. It was one of the great--you can't match the thrills like this in a lifetime, to hear the things that you helped write for a very historic day being read by the President signing a most historic piece of legislation. It's about as much satisfaction as you can get in all of your life, to see something like that. I would say those were the moments, just from a personal standpoint. When you can sit back now five years later and look back at those moments, they are certainly the most inspiring, intense moments of a person's life. Just thinking here now, it was quite something.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview VII]