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WILLIAM S. WHITE ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW II

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Gift of Personal Statement

By William S. White

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

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INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM S. WHITE (Tape #2)

INTERVIEWER: DOROTHY PIERCE McSWEENEY

March 10, 1969

M: This is the second interview with Mr. William S. White. We're in his home in Washington, D.C., and today is Monday, March 10, 1969, and it's 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

Mr. White, when we concluded our session last time--our Ist interview--we had chronologically gotten up to the period of about 1966, and I had just started to ask you about the increased criticism that really began at that point and reached a pretty harsh level. Just generally, do you attribute it to any one thing? Were there any sort of straw, so to speak?

W: I think there were, of course, several things, as is usually the case. I suppose, simplfying it somewhat, that the big thing was the war in Viet Nam, and President Johnson's manifest unwillingness to pull out there short of what he thought was an honorable settlement. It might be said parenthetically, by the way, as a matter of history that this same sense of criticism, of hostility, and of rejection was actually beginning in respect to John Kennedy not long before he died. Actually, this one didn't go, of course, so far nor did the issue become so divisive. I think one could speculate that had he lived, had he not tragically died, that Kennedy would have faced somewhat the same in-party rebellion on Viet Nam that Johnson actually faced.

Looking back on it, I think it would be correct to say that this was the Great Divide, when it became absolutely certain to the left wing of the Democratic party that he would not be talked out of Viet Nam. That is when the process of the destruction of Lyndon Johnson began. Now, of course there were contributing factors, but fundamentally what occurred here--and what I think is novel in history--unique in history--is a tremendously hostile movement against him from within his own party, and that's what made it intimately difficult. Mr. Truman had suffered enormous abuse for going into and staying in Korea, but the great difference was that essentially the opposition to Truman came traditionally from the Republicans. What made Johnson's position extremely delicate and difficult was that his opposition came from the left wing of his own party.

The Republican party on the whole was notably responsible in in this matter. President Johnson could scarcely have survived, I think, politically had he not had the faithful support in this matter of most of the Republican leaders--certainly beginning with General Eisenhower. So in brief, to summarize, the number one divisive factor so far as his Administration was concerned was certainly Viet Nam.

He had also, for a variety of reasons, gotten into an increasingly difficult situation with part of the press, and particularly the eastern based press, and this is another story in

itself. It's a very complex story. Essentially these people--this was glandular. They deeply disliked him; they always did. Part of it, I think, was resentment that he had interrupted what they thought to be the Kennedy dynasty--that is, to say, circumstances had, and he was a symbol of it. Part of it I think was puerile--it was his so-called accent, the omission of not having gone to an Ivy League college, the supposition among some people that he was essentially a raw frontiersman lacking sophistication. At any rate he had a tremendous difficulty, of course, with large part of the press--certainly a large part of the Eastern press. And, again, this had many reasons, some of which I've given; some went back to his own occasional tactlessness. He didn't suffer fools gladly, or those he thought to be fools, and he never suffered gladly criticism which he thought to be puerile or misdirected or not directed to the issue. That's a rather long reply. I think that essentially, in a capsule way, explains it.

M: Mr. White, newsmen are somewhat considered phrase makers and of course one of the phrases that come out of this Administration has been what is called the "credibility gap."

W: Yes.

M: And in part this included the Viet Nam war.

W: Yes.

M: It also has to do with the charge that Mr. Johnson at times said one thing and did another.

W: Yes.

M: Did you ever see any instances of this or see any supportive evidence of this having occurred?

W: Well, it requires a complicated reply, beginning with this fundamental fact that of course all Presidents in some sense or another seek to "manage the news." That is to say, they seek understandably to have it reflect as well as possible on them and on their designs. They also seek understandably to have it reflect well on purely national designs, as for example in this case the Viet Nam war. I think the President was open to the accusation that he sometimes misled people. I don't think I can recall any substantial case of this in a matter of great seriousness. For example, I do not at all accept the charge that he ever misled anybody on an issue like Viet Nam. He may not have explained it to the satisfaction of some people, but one must bear in mind that to many people here no explanation would have been quite satisfactory because their essential desire was simply to get out of Viet Nam.

But in smaller ways, yes, the President did, consciously or not, mislead people, not I think on what he thought was a matter of any significance.

For example, he would rarely tell the reporters at the White House or allow them to be told when and how he meant, let's say, to go to Texas. This was purely a personal matter. He was never able to engage his attention on the trivial, and he regarded this, first of all, as trivial, when was he going to Texas and so on. In the second place, he had an oddly private view of himself in some ways. He didn't really think this was anybody's business when he went to Texas. And of course this was not a tactful attitude to take. Of course, it did sometimes embarrass the reporters in their logistics and their movements and so on.

Essentially the so-called credibility gap was a fabrication. That is to say, it was a fabrication in the sense that it was supposed to imply genuine untruthfulness on things that mattered. I think it arose myself through the New York Times and specifically through Mr. James Reston. I recall this instant quite well. It was early in the President's Administration. He was preparing to go before the United Nations, and Mr. Reston apparently in getting his information from some subordinate source in the State Department had forecast that the President would take such and such a line. In fact, the President took an almost opposite line, and I think Mr. Reston thought that the President had recanted somehow on what he had originally planned to do. This was not the case because I happen to have seen the President's original draft.

But it began in instances of this kind. And frankly, a great deal of it was reportorial pique because the President was famous for what he called keeping his options open, not indicating what he meant to do until he did. Of course this, parenthetically, was entirely proper. But it did of course militate against so-called informed articles speculating ahead of time. When those articles turned out to be wrong, their authors rather humanly thought the President had switched around. Somebody had been misleading them, and it must be him.

Now, it ought to be said, or course, that he never told all the truth all the time, nor did any President, because that would be idiotic. There are occasions, particularly in security matters of war and so on, in which a President must play it rather cagily, cozily so to speak, and he did that. He did have a certain undue, I thought, regard for secrecy as such. This I never understood about him. There were times when he would not let people know things that were quite unimportant because he had the strong feeling that he must keep things to himself. It was one of his working habits always, and it caused him a great deal of unnecessary trouble. There's no doubt about this. However, I think it ought to be said again that fundamentally and in any true sense this credibility gap was largely a myth.

M: Mr. White, there were also accusations that when a leak of an announcement came out prior to its being announced officially, that it most likely--

W: Would not happen?

M: There would be a withdrawal or a change of that appointment.

W: I heard reports or rumors of such incidents on, again, comparatively minor things like the appointment of a relatively minor official--or the proposed appointment. I'm not able to say of my own knowledge whether they happened or not, whether he did in fact reverse himself. To my knowledge he did not, but I'm not prepared to say he did not because I just don't know.

M: Mr. White, he also apparently had trouble coming across on television, which is now a very strong medium in communicating.

W: Yes, there's no doubt he did. I think that again is sort of a complicated human thing. The President, as I think I mentioned to you earlier, in many respects was oddly old-fashioned. One of the aspects of this was that I think he always, until toward the end at least of his Administration, felt alien to television. I think he thought in his heart as many Presidents have--I think John Kennedy felt this in his heart--that it was theater; that it was somewhat spurious; that it was made up--and indeed there's something in that. At any rate he wasn't comfortable in that medium, and I've seen him, for example, close at hand clinching his hands in great nervousness at approaching this magic lantern. He never was very good at that except on those rare occasions when he didn't care, when he was just relaxed and behaved as he naturally would. I remember one or two occasions when he was very good on television, but generally speaking it's true he was not.

He also had a curious kind of inbuilt unfairness of life toward him in that he photographed poorly most of the time. He was in fact a far better looking man than he usually appeared, and this I don't understand except it's that mysterious thing that he was not photogenic.

M: Do you think it's possible that he gave too much access to the press--I mean, gave of himself too much time--

W: I profoundly believe that's so. I believe one of his troubles was a ceaseless attempt to placate the press. I felt, although I'm a press man, that this was quite wrong and quite counter-productive, so to speak. I think that his mistake--and I think it was a serious one here--was not to look at the press impersonally. I think he should have been available to the degree he felt wise and no more. I think he should have ceased his tireless efforts to make the press "like him". I think in short he put altogether too much importance to the press. I think he'd have been infinitely better off if he had simply dealt with it as one of the things he had to deal with--with respect, yes, but mutual respect. The press did not show him the respect he showed to the press.

I think all his life he had an exceptional sensitivity to the press. Some people put it down to sheer vanity, to seeing his name in the paper. I think that's much too simplistic. I

think he rightly saw it as a very powerful tool for a politician, but I think he made rather too much of it--as, by the way, he always made too much of writers.

If the President had a fault in this connection, it was not being anti-intellectual, as he was sometimes called, it was having an inordinate respect for intellectuals and writers in particular. I remember many occasions when a paper of state or a speech was being prepared, and he would have the place swarming with writers. And, of course, it sometimes is a case of too many cooks. He would by the way always in the end take it, and of course in the end it would be his own speech. But his shortcomings in this regard were almost the antithesis of what many people thought--not too unkind to intellectuals but too kind, not too contemptuous of writers, for example, and artists but far too much the other way.

M: Mr. White, did he ever talk with you about his press relations, his public image and his various modes of talking to the press? Originally he used to walk around out on the south lawn.

W: Oh, yes, he talked to me about it many times, usually with a very loud and angry voice. When he first became President, he asked me at the White House one night what would I do about the press. I said, "Mr. President, if I were you I'd deal frankly and as fully with them as circumstances would permit, but I'd never, never get on a familiar basis, nor would I have any pets." He did not, by the way, even with me, although people thought he did.

He nodded, and said, "I quite agree with that." The very next week he went down to the ranch in Texas; he took some press people with him; and among other things he got into his Lincoln convertible and he had some press people with him. Because he was trying to be kind and they were having beer, he had beer, and he was driving 80 miles an hour--which is common in that part of the country. But there were great stories about this President out drinking beer and throwing cans in the road, which by the way was not right. He was drinking beer out of a paper cup. And ironically enough, he detests beer, always did. If he drank at all, he drank Scotch whiskey, but he was doing it trying to be a good fellow, you see. Well, it came out in the press and it looked disorderly and somewhat shady and what not. And he came back and he was literally furious and screaming about this thing. I didn't of course say to him, "I told you so," because I thought that would be presumptuous, but I did sort of mildly approach the point again I'd made earlier. And he said, "But, Bill, you don't understand. They were my guests!"

Well, to him, and that's an aspect of his traditional attitudes. If reporters were with him personally in a context of that kind, he did think of him as his guests, and of course they didn't think that at all. He had the old-fashioned idea if you have a man to your house to dinner, even if he's a press man, he doesn't go out later and say that you were drinking too much or you were doing this, that, and the other. He never could grasp that people

did this.

M: Did he ever talk with you about the polls and his ratings?

W: Oh, yes, he was famous, you know, for showing the polls, particularly of course when they were being kind to him. But this again was an oversimplified thing by many people, that they thought he was just literally transported by the polls, transfixed by the polls. This was untrue really. He was concerned by the polls, as, by the way, with nearly everything else, by what he thought to be their total meaning on his policies. Of course, he was not unconcerned about himself. He was proud of the polls in the early days, I think, primarily because to him they indicated that in spite of the misgivings and the attacks of the ultra liberals that most of the people in this country supported, for example, Viet Nam. He was not, in the crude expression, "poll happy." He recognized the polls had a meaning.

He had privately a very great reservation about their accuracy. For example, at the height of that time when he was showing the polls--showing how much he was up and so on, he would say to me, "This is far too high. I don't believe this." And he said, by the way, "In two years or a year and a half you'll see it down to the other way." He was pretty objective about it. Of course, naturally, when the polls showed what he thought was approval of policy, he liked them.

M: Mr. White, did you ever contribute anything to any speeches that he made?

W: Only on one occasion, oddly enough. That was a very limited contribution, and it came about in this way. When he was getting ready to go to Congress with what later became his most famous speech on civil rights, he called me at home and asked me if I'd come to the White House and, as he put it, "look it over" and make suggestions. I did go, and as I said earlier, there were a dozen people there working on it. He was preparing to use in it the expression "we shall overcome," which, as you know, was a slogan for Negro militants at the time. I thought this was rather unwisely strong, since my opinion has been asked. I proposed the addition to his speech of a single paragraph to the effect that however wrong the South was now--and they were wrong about civil rights--they had had a history on the whole of gallantry and courage--something to that effect, and he used that. But that was the only thing I ever did, and the only thing ever asked me to do in a way of a speech.

By the way, I'd like to return a moment--I forgot something that I think material about the President's press relations, particularly about his press secretaries. His first press secretary was George Reedy, an old assistant to Mr. Johnson, who was an extremely able, decent man, somewhat academically minded, somewhat pedagogical in approach. He was not really effective as a press secretary, not because of lack of brains, but because it wasn't really his cup of tea.

Then the President got Bill Moyers--Bill Don Moyers--as press secretary. My opinion was that Moyers did the President infinite harm in the Washington press, because it was commonplace to see articles making note of the wise, compassionate attitude of Mr. Moyers and the difficulty of dealing with this terrible man Johnson. There's no doubt in my mind that that was a very bad thing for the President, because that was really the beginning of a widespread journalistic belief that the President was extremely difficult to get along with, that he was harsh, and so on.

Now, I think myself, there's no doubt about it, the President was a perfectionist. He was hard on his people in the sense that he worked them like the devil, but he worked himself like the--it didn't occur to him that there was a clock for anybody. In that sense he was harsh--if that's harsh. On the other hand, he's extremely paternal with his people and basically very kind and very often did things quietly for them, sending their children to college, things of that kind, that nobody ever read about. This was a side of Johnson that somehow in the Moyer's tenure never came through. What came through was what a stern and difficult taskmaster he was--and he was that. But what didn't come through were the acts of kindness he would do. I've seen him, for example, stop in the middle of a very serious matter and say to a secretary, "You're looking too thin. See the doctor." And sometimes, indeed, he would call a doctor and say, "I want you to get hold of so-and-so, now. I don't like her looks. I'm afraid she's ill or he's ill." He did a lot of things--like all able men, he was mixed. He was difficult. He was a perfectionist, but he also great kindness, particularly toward people who worked for him. He had a highly paternalistic streak, indeed a kind of patriarchal streak. And it is a fact that he kept more people for a longer time than any politician I've known. So, he must on the whole have been somebody good to work for. I just wanted to interrupt and go back to that to finish off this discussion of the press part of it.

M: I was going to ask that next anyway. Let me ask you how much do you think it is the responsibility of the press secretary as to the President's public image and his press relations?

W: I think Jim Hagerty who served President Eisenhower put it this way, and I agree with Hagerty. It's rather romantic to suppose that the press secretary is not in there to make the President look as well as he can. Obviously that's what he should do. It does not follow of course that he should be in there as a sheer propaganda agent or publicity agent. I think ideally the press secretary should present the President as sympathetically as possible to the press, and the press to the President. But primarily his function is simply what it says--to be a conduit for information. And I think Moyers' difficulty was he always wished to be a high policy maker, or to get involved in things that were not really his business whereas his successor George Christian, I thought, was splendid because Christian looked at it simply as a job of informing the press. And to the degree that he could, he did it.

M: Are there occasions when these secretaries are supposed to be responsible leaks of information?

W: To leak information? There are occasions when they do that, surely. And other people in the administration do it. However, this leak sounds rather sinister. That shouldn't be seen as necessarily a sinister thing. There are many occasions when a leak, so-called, is both entirely true and useful to the reporter and his paper and useful in another sense to an Administration. For example, there are things that cannot be said officially, although quite true, that can be published in this way; and they do add to the public sum total of knowledge and they're not in any sense evil. For an illustration, let's say the President, or any President, determined in connection with Viet Nam to take action as currently for example to heighten our military resistance in the face of the escalation by the Communist side, but he didn't wish to say right out, "Here and now, I'm going to do it," because he thought perhaps diplomatically he still had some freedom of movement. Now, if that were leaked out, the President considering this--considering escalating our side--this would be entirely true in these circumstances and entirely useful. So there are leaks and leaks.

There were very few leaks from the White House in anybody's Administration in my time that were false or fraudulent. They are mainly of the kind of thing I've described here. Now, of course, it all goes back, too, to the competence and maturity of the correspondent involved. He has got to have some judgment, and if he has got integrity he won't consciously write anything that he knows to be false. But the use of outright falsehood in these matters is extremely rare in my experience.

M: Mr. White, how would you compare the forums of holding press conferences from such people as Hargerty with Eisenhower, Salinger with Kennedy, and both Moyers and Christian with Mr. Johnson?

W: How would I compare them?

M: Yes.

W: You mean the operations of the press secretaries?

M: All right, both the operations, but also the presentation of them of the President in a press conference.

W: Hargerty was perhaps the best at it. Hargerty was extremely good both in briefing President Eisenhower on what to expect in the way of questions and in suggesting, I'm sure, answers beforehand. Salinger was quite good at that. Moyers, in my opinion, as I've indicated, was not good at that except where it promoted Moyers, to be blunt about it. Christian, I think, was good to the degree that he was allowed to make suggestions. President Johnson, always busier than any other President--he really truly was, for that

matter--and he gave less time I think to preparation of his press conferences than anybody I've known.

M: And as to presentation, some of them call formal, some of them say informal, and Mr. Johnson was known for more or less informal press conferences.

W: His most successful ones I thought were the informal quick ones he called. He did this both by design--that is, to cut down the number of reporters who would be present because it can become quite unwieldy. It can become a kind of a show. And he also did it because occasionally things would come up that he wanted immediately to disclose, and he'd disclose them. He really preferred dealing with the regular White House correspondents, I think mainly because he knew they understood things better. Also, as I said earlier, he never liked the huge press conference because he always had a kind of a feeling there was something phony about it, particularly under television.

M: Mr. White, has the more or less continued defense and support of Mr. Johnson lost you any columns in your syndication?

W: It undoubtedly has. I don't know what the net figure on it would be. My column before he was President and since his Presidency has stayed at about the same level of net growth. I know instances where I have undoubtedly lost papers because I supported him, and notably on Viet Nam. Curiously enough they came from both the right and the left. I lost some so-called Republican papers. I lost some liberal Democratic papers. There was a time when I was very severely punished. But I think, looking on the whole over the years, that punishment so to speak largely balanced off by new papers. I should add this, there's no doubt not merely myself but every journalist I know who consistently supported Viet Nam was truly punished--particularly in the East, in more ways than one.

M: Would you explain that?

W: Yes, it's a rather terrifying thing. There grew up in some of the Eastern press a stereotype that a man who supported the Vietnamese war must be necessarily a kind of a stooge of President Johnson. This, by the way, in spite of the fact that I, for example, had supported it under Kennedy. I supported Eisenhower's part of it. I support it now, by the way, under Nixon. Therefore there was an undoubted effort generally to discredit in journalism those of us who stood up for this war. I know many instances of that. I think it wouldn't be useful to go into details, but my friend and colleague Kenneth Crawford in Newsweek had his troubles. I had mine. Joe Alsop had his. Any of us who persistently stood up for it found that we paid for it in one way or another.

M: Mr. White, do you think that close personal ties affect your political objectivity in analysis?

W: I don't know. It's a hard question. Perhaps they do in a way, but on the other hand in national journalism a man who doesn't know the people who are operating things is absolutely no good at all. This is a theoretical thing, this theory of standing absolutely remote. One can't stand remote from the powerful people in this country if he really expects to understand what's going on because in that case he simply gets the superficials, hand-outs, so on. I think it sort of balances off. No doubt about it that a man's personal fondness for a politician, I suppose, will to a degree have an effect on him. I'm not honestly conscious that it ever had any effect on me in relation to President Johnson. I'm perfectly aware on the other hand that my close association with him enabled me to write truthfully a great many things I couldn't have written otherwise.

M: Mr. White, do you think that many of our columnists changed their stands on various controversial issues to meet the demands placed upon them as opposed to being independently analytical or objective?

W: I'd hate to think so, nor would I say it. I have seen some instances where I was compelled to suspect that, particularly, as I said, about Viet Nam, but I certainly would not care to make a flat assertion to that effect. But to repeat, it was extremely unchic to be for the Vietnamese war toward the end particularly.

M: Has this sort of reverse objectivity influenced other people's writing, or I should say their own--

W: You mean the younger people? I don't know whether I follow the question.

M: In some columnists' cases when they became so caught up in something that they'd lose their objectivity--

W: It is possible, of course, it's possible that one lost his objectivity in the Vietnamese war. But I think not, at least I claim not in my own case. When I was much younger I was on the Associated Press war desk in New York in the days of the so-called "Phony war," and I maintained from the beginning a position as far as my responsibilities would permit that the British were right and Hitler was wrong. Most of my colleagues in that period bought the Communist line that there really wasn't much difference between Britain and Hitler-Germany, that is, you know, until Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, and then they all became pro-ally. I believed that judgment was right then, and I stood by it. I believe the judgment I followed and others followed on Viet Nam was right, and I stand by that. It may have been a loss of objectivity, but I think on some things--some issues--that objectivity is a rather curious term to apply. I confess, I was not objective toward Hitler, if that meant that I ever thought that he was in any way right. And I was never objective toward Ho if that means in any way I thought he was justified.

M: I think I was thinking of some of the people who became critics and then through their

accepting this part just accelerated their criticism.

W: You mean the critics of the war?

M: Yes, and of the President too.

W: I think this is absolutely true. Of course, this is perhaps a little self-serving since I was on the opposite side. But this is a very difficult question. I saw what I thought was a great deal of sheer mindless assault on the President. And I sometimes strongly suspected it was to defend a vested interest in anti-Vietnamism with which the man who held it was not wholly comfortable, if I'm making myself clear. It became fashionable to present him as a kind of warlord or devil because he wouldn't get out of there. I do submit that history will show, I think, on the record here that the disputation between the so-called hawks like myself and the so-called doves, that the hawks allowed the doves far greater tolerance of expression than the doves allowed the hawks. I know in short of nobody who was punished in the press because he was a dove.

M: The criticism got very petty at some points, and very personal.

W: Some of it was puerile beyond belief. I think indignation at that is proper if one detested Johnson, which, of course, I did not. But some of the things said about him were appalling, ugly, and intensely puerile. Motivations were attached to him that were monstrous. I submit that any rational person knows he couldn't possibly have liked being in the war because of course he knew it was destroying him. Indeed, as you know, perhaps I haven't mentioned this--when he announced in March of '68 that he was not running again and would not accept nomination, he did it as he said because he hoped he could therefore remove his personality from the issue and perhaps could work then in a calmer atmosphere toward a rational solution of Viet Nam. Now, I personally know that this was entirely true because he had told me in great confidence at Camp David nearly eighteen months before that he doubted he would run again. Indeed, he had about decided he would not for those very reasons. He had a genuine hope that if he could remove himself as a figure of controversy that people who were against him would then at least believe that he was trying to do his best in Viet Nam. As you know he was not at all let up even after he announced he would not run. The vilification--and I speak of vilification here as great distinction from criticism--went right on. It was a very melancholy chapter in our history, and I honestly believe that no President in our lifetime has been more unfairly abused.

M: Mr. White, were you surprised that night on March 31, 1968?

W: Not at all. I didn't know the time at which he was going to do it. I knew unless he changed his mind--and he certainly had given no evidence of it--he was not going to run. And I knew why, as I said. I think it's tragic for the sake of the country, at least, that at

least after he'd given up his own ambition, he was not allowed to proceed with some kind of a unified country. That's what he had greatly hoped, and of course he didn't get it.

M: Do you think that it politically hurt him enough that he could not have won either the nomination or the election, supposing he had won the nomination?

W: Speaking realistically, he would certainly have won the nomination. Anybody who supposed he wouldn't just doesn't understand the way those things work. Whether he would have won the election, of course, is highly speculative. I didn't think at the time he could have. I now think in the afterlight that he probably could have, but of course that's a guess.

M: Mr. White, as an author who wrote about Mr. Johnson, I'm sure that you probably read some of the other books that have been published during his Administration, which go in all different directions as far as analysis of Mr. Johnson on all different subject areas. But notably there are such ones as Evans and Novak's book The Exercise of Power, Sibley's A Very Personal Presidency, and I suppose the most recent one The Tragedy of LBJ by Mr. Goldman. Have you read these?

W: The only one I've read, oddly enough, is the Goldman book--which is not said in any spirit of upmanship. I just didn't have time in that period. I read the Goldman book, and I think in some respects--it's a frustrating book to me because in some respects I think it extremely good. Specifically, I think Goldman had a very keen perception of the Johnson staff, individually and collectively. I think he had a very poor perception of the President, the reason being he didn't really know the President. He was in the East wing, the non-operating wing of the White House, and was primarily and really sort of assigned to Mrs. Johnson. In short, when he wrote about what he knew, he was good; when he wrote about what he didn't know, I thought he was rather poor. It, however is a book of great value, and there are many parts of it that I consider highly insightful and perceptive. The others I just don't know about. I haven't read them, and I think in part--before I wrote my book, there had been various Johnson books--I never read any of those either. I think my motive was I didn't want to be influenced one way or the other by them, and I simply went out on my own. But that's all I can contribute to this point.

M: Mr. White, I'd like to ask you about Mr. Johnson's relations with Congress. Having also written a couple of books about that, I think you might have something to say. I'd like to ask you about it in terms of the saying that he lost his consensus--this would mean both Congress and the public.

W: Well, first of all, he didn't. That's another stereotype. From beginning to end he had essentially a good relationship with Congress--except one again must put aside Viet Nam, which was a special thing. He had undoubtedly the most effective, most productive relationship with Congress of any man in history, with the possible exception of Franklin

Roosevelt, who, again, in a somewhat similar way, I wouldn't say lost Congress, but had to alter his course because of a foreign war. President Johnson was utter master in dealing with Congress. There's simply no doubt about that. Your use of the term consensus amuses me, because this suddenly became a bad word in American politics. It's a pejorative word that is intended by many to suggest that Lyndon Johnson had created some monstrous thing called consensus, and that this is the trouble with the country. Of course this preceeded from a misunderstanding of what consensus is. It's a long word for saying the consent, really, of the governed. And he was indeed a consensus politician, namely, constantly seeking to broaden areas of toleration and acceptance in the country for him and his policies. He never lost his consensus except in the sense that it was broken up inside, as I said earlier, by the left-wing Democrats on Viet Nam. But from beginning to end he had an extraordinary success with Congress if one looks at what actually happened instead of what was said about it.

M: Mr. White, in your book on the Senate you expressed the view that the Senate has a sort of desire for independence, and even in the early part I think you mentioned that Mr. Johnson promoted this independence, not only from any White House but even from the party.

W: Yes, he did.

M: Now, this would be directly relating to Viet Nam, but would it not imply that Mr. Johnson did not think in these terms when he assumed the Presidency?

W: First of all, I'd like to point out to you that in that book on the Senate called Citadel, I also had a strong section arguing that in matters of foreign policy the Senate's view of itself was overweening and that this was a Presidential function--that is, the conduct of foreign policy. Now, he thought so too. If the thrust of your question is whether when he was a powerful Senator he rather created some of the preconditions for his own later trouble as President, this is certainly partly true, but I think not wholly so. You see, the point was he did not think--nor did I incidentally in this book think--that the legitimate powers of the Senate ran to that extreme. He had the view, and this is the Constitutional view, that this is a unique thing. The Senate at home, the Congress at home has a right to badger the President as much as it wishes, or to obstruct him, and often perhaps it should. But the Constitution makes a great distinction in respect to foreign policy. That's the President's sphere. He can't properly be obstructed there unless people are profoundly certain they're right, because he has more information. So I don't know whether one could say that his concept of the Senate, or the Senate as he helped make it, was what was wrong. I think it was the departure by the Senate leaders from the right tradition about the special relationship with the President's foreign policy.

M: Mr. White, it has been said during the last part of this period that Mr. Johnson was, not unfriendly, but at least didn't see his opponents in Congress as often or extend any social

invitations, or have any social relations with these people--

W: I think that's both right and wrong. I think it's wrong in the sense that he withheld any social invitations. He had a host of Congressional people at the White House--in fact, I thought too many--too many in the sense that I thought it took too much of his time. And in that social connection he never divided any sheep and goats in the social invitations.

It is entirely true that in a private and practical and useful way, head-to-head way, he saw less of his antagonists as time went on, not really so much by his choice as by his reluctant conclusion that he could never get anywhere with them. I speak, for example, of Senator Fulbright and people like that. He just reached the conclusion that he would try very hard to persuade them--incidentally, in these relationships, he was never belligerent, contrary to what might have been thought. He was always placating. He was trying to placate, but I think he finally got to the point where he felt there was no good in doing this any more, "I'm just wasting my time." He didn't hold any vindictive view of these people. Oddly, enough he was far kinder toward them in private conversations than they were to him. But he quit seeing some people on the grounds that it was no good.

He did continue right to the end to see Senator Mansfield, the Majority Leader, and he was deeply distressed because he kept thinking he could get Mansfield at least to let him up about Viet Nam. And every time Mansfield, Johnson thought, had promised to do it, he'd go back to the Senate the next day and make another speech--and very indiscreet speeches at times, which harmed not Johnson, but the country. Or rather not so much Johnson--it of course harmed Johnson--but harmed the country more, at least the President thought so and I did too.

M: Mr. White, were you particularly surprised by Robert Kennedy's candidacy early last year?

W: No, not greatly surprised, except in this sense. I think if Senator McCarthy had not first run--Eugene McCarthy in New Hampshire--that Robert Kennedy might not have run. But I think after McCarthy's qualified, at least, success--it was more or less a success in New Hampshire--that it showed that the President had political weakness of a significant kind, and that that probably caused Kennedy to go forward openly into it--that, and I guess the feeling that after all if it's to be had, why should McCarthy have it, not him!

M: Do you think that the fact that Mr. Johnson kept so many of the Kennedy Cabinet on hurt his Administration?

W: I certainly do. This is a matter I'm rather glad--that and the Moyers matter--is not immediately on the record. I don't wish to persecute anybody personally. I have no personal motive in it, but I thought it was very bad. I think when the President first came in under tragic circumstances it was obviously wise to retain every one of the Kennedy people he could, as long as he could.

But I thought that after his election in his own right and after the enormous difficulties he was having with Robert Kennedy and with others, to some extent, that he would have been far wiser to have discharged them and taken the fallout. There would have been fallout, but taken it, as Harry Truman took it when he discharged Jimmy Byrnes on his right and Henry Wallace on his left. I think the President made a classic mistake in that. I think, again, it's rather ironical because this image of this powerful, arrogant man--the truth is, he wasn't enough so in these circumstances. I thought he should have gotten rid of Robert Kennedy, not in any desire to hurt Kennedy, but in the obvious fact that Kennedy would not work with him. And I thought he should have gotten rid of McNamara at Defense--not because McNamara was a bad man, but because I don't think McNamara had his real heart in the war. The President oddly enough had far more sympathy for those people than most people ever realized, and a great deal of what he did was out of genuine compassion in keeping them on.

Now, mind you, I'm aware it wasn't wholly unrelated to politics, because he thought, I guess, particularly if he fired Robert Kennedy, there'd be a terrible outcry and there would be a great division in the party. What I'm saying in hindsight, at least, is I think while that division would have occurred, in the end he'd have been better off. I think, although I can't establish this historically, that he had a great deal of disloyalty in his Administration from beginning to end. It's not establishable in a court of law, but it's established clearly enough for my belief.

I think he'd have been better off if he had, after his own election, had become just what he was--Texan and all--and said, "All right, yes, I am a Texan. All right, I'm not an Easterner. So what!" But he always was to the very end placating, placating, placating, and I think that was his profound mistake.

- M: Do you think there was either too much sensitivity to what became the Kennedy people, the Kennedy followers or adherents, on the White House part, or was there a justifiable Kennedy group that were politically out to hurt him?
- W: Both statements are true. Both points are true. There was a Kennedy group out to hurt him, certainly in the sense that they wanted the job for a Kennedy. I thought he was overly sensitive to all of it for the reasons I've just given. I think one reaches a point at which he must cease trying to appease his antagonists and simply say, "Well, there it is." I thought in that sense, as I indicated, that he went rather too far in the act of appeasement, and also that he was hypersensitive to the things they said and did. Now, mind you, they'd hurt anybody, but I think it would have been better to have closed his ears to them.
- M: Mr. White, there are some things written that during the latter part of his Administration he began losing labor on the one hand and big business, through either railroad strikes or steel price rollbacks--there is a whole list of elements--big city politicians, party organizations. I think the thrust of my question is did he not tend to his political--

W: Fences?

M: Fences?

W: I don't think he tended to them as well really as he should. That's probably a rather novel suggestion coming from a non-politician and writer, but I thought that he rather forgot his domestic political needs in many directions. But as I said earlier to you, he didn't really intend for a long time to run again. I think he'd have been better off if he had spent more time frankly politicking in the old traditional sense. He did very little of that. Actually, I'd say in the last two years of his Administration he literally gave it no real concern--I mean, domestic politics or party politics. I think it was about one of the last things on his mind. That's because he was engaged, for his political life of course and in his historical record, in Viet Nam. He really gave that his whole attention, almost entirely, and really to be blunt and somewhat profane about it, I don't think he gave a damn politically at that point. He told me once, "If my Gallup poll falls to minus eight, by God, I'll never get out of Viet Nam until I can get out honorably." He often spoke with tears in his eyes of the men there, of our troops.

What infuriated him most of all was not the attacks on Johnson, although obviously he didn't like them, is what he considered to be the callousness shown toward our people in the field. He was accused of being a flag waver--he was a flag waver in a sense. But he had the most terrible concern for those men. I've seen him when an assistant would bring him a nightly battle report, and I've seen him cry at our casualties. He had a tremendous feeling--and when he went to Viet Nam, it was profoundly moving to him, the experience. He'd talk about it. He'd talk about it many weeks after he came back. He'd show private films of it to his friends. He was deeply concerned about the men and of course he had a certain private concern. He had two sons-in-law in Viet Nam. His daughters' husbands were both at one time or another in Viet Nam. But to answer your question briefly, I don't think he cared at all about domestic politics in the last two years, except in the sense that he generally hoped that whoever succeeded him would be a good President.

M: Do you think that the Democratic National Committee was in pretty much a shambles by the beginning of 1968?

W: Yes, he knew it, but I don't think he cared. The President never cared much about committees. Rightly or wrongly, he never was a committee politician, nor not much of an organization one. He was an intuitive politician. Rayburn and the old fellows in the Senate and the House all felt that. They didn't give a damn about national committees, and he didn't either. He felt they were something of a nuisance, and he just sort of let anybody run them. He didn't care much. I don't think this would, by the way, have made much difference if there hadn't been any Viet Nam war.

He didn't believe in the committee system on anything. Now, he may have been quite wrong--I'm not saying that he was right. I'm simply saying this was the way he was. He regarded it all as rather pompous and not of much significance. He thought elections were won or lost by men, and specifically by candidates--by Jones and Smith and Brown. That's the way he looked at politics. He wasn't much of an organized type in that sense. He ran his politics pretty much in a caucus in his own hat. He was highly individual in that way. So did Truman. He was like Harry Truman in there. I don't think Truman ever went much for that committee business. He didn't openly scorn it to the degree Johnson did, but I don't think that Truman thought much of it, nor did Roosevelt. I think Roosevelt saw it as something of a place to put some people he liked, but I don't think he ever paid much mind to it.

M: This doesn't by any way reflect on his feelings for the Democratic party?

W: No. But again here President Johnson was not ever very partisan. Very few people realized that. He was a Democrat, but as he once said, that was the last in his order of values. First, he said he was an American, and then a free man and so on, and then he was a Democrat. He was concerned for the Democratic party institutionally, but he was not ever a violent partisan. Actually, he was far more concerned with parties as mere implements. He didn't think a party was a principle or sacred thing. He thought it was a hammer in somebody's hands, an implement to do something with. He didn't think of it in terms of party loyalty, which he thought could be carried to rather absurd lengths. He never was a bolter himself, and I don't think ever would have been, but he never thought that bolting one's party was the ultimate sin.

M: Mr. White, we talked about the press secretaries, and I did want to ask you about other members of his staff that you have perhaps gotten to know. I'm wondering, first, did Mr. Johnson intentionally sort of balance his staff's philosophy in order to--

W: I always thought he did. I never discussed that with him, but I think he always liked to have a little bit of everything in it, as he did everything else. As President, he talked to an extraordinary number of people of all kinds of views. He did like to keep a kind of a spectrum concept, I think, in his staff. Incidentally, I think he kept Moyers so long because he thought Moyers was a conduit to the Kennedy people, that he would have some--and also he kept him because he had a kind of a fatherly feeling, again--Moyers was quite young. Anyhow, generally speaking, yes, the President tried, I think, to have a staff of fairly wide series of views on things.

The Cabinet, I think, was somewhat the same way, although, again, as you know, he inherited a good deal of his cabinet. His great real associates, when the chips were really down, were, first of all Dean Rusk, who was Secretary of State; and next, Henry Fowler, who was Secretary of the Treasury. These people had the President's entire confidence, and only those people, I should have said--and Walt Rostow, who was his

White House assistant on foreign affairs. But the man with Johnson was always Rusk in the end.

M: Within his inner White House staff, wouldn't this balancing of opinion have led to some friction, and did you ever see evidence of it?

W: No great amount of it, other than I've seen rather normal competitive, well, perhaps jealousies--you know, young men who are on the way up. There was certainly some friction, however manifested I don't know, between men like Walter Jenkins before his tragedy, on the one side, and Marvin Watson and, let's say, Moyers on the other. But I don't think there was much real backbiting other than the normal sort of abrasion one would expect involving people who are all gathered around a powerful, sometimes egocentric personality like Mr. Johnson.

The President never had the sort of misty-eyed view of his staff that people thought he did. He talked to an awful lot of people, as I said, but when it came down to it he was very much alone in his decisions. Perhaps no President was ever more truly a personal President, I would say, than Johnson. He saw the staff as a staff, but he didn't anoint it with any special aura. His view was, somewhat amusing, that if Jones could do this, Jones could do that. He didn't have many specialists--he just sent them running all over the place wherever he felt like it. The only real specialist he had, I'd say, was Rostow.

M: Mr. White, your book The Professional on Mr. Johnson was published in 1964. Do you see anything that you wrote then in a different light now?

W: I don't think I do. As I said earlier, in a different climate, in a different atmosphere, I might have written some aspects more critically of him than I did if it were purely a historical work or purely academic work. No, I think in general I don't see any difference. I think I rather reasonably predicted what sort of a President he would be; and, namely, I thought I rather brought out early how extremely liberal he really was. I don't think many people knew that. I don't think I'd change anything in it. I might add to it. In the present historical context I would add to it. I don't know that I'd take anything out of it.

M: Have there been any columns or stories that you have written that you would now make any changes in?

W: Oh, yes, of course. I don't know that I can recall specifically--give you specific examples. For example, I think if I were going back to it I would have paid more mind, more attention, and indeed, given more criticism to certain of his domestic efforts. As I mentioned before, I thought some went too far.

You see, you had an odd situation. This is what made his Administration unique,

as I said earlier. His real problem was his own people. And curiously enough, the people for whom he did the most--that is, the liberal people--were the people who destroyed him in Viet Nam. In short, there was almost a total absence of traditional opposition in domestic terms. In other words, the Republican party wasn't as critical of him domestically as I thought it should have been. And perhaps as one journalist, I should have been more critical than I was. I think in respect to both myself and the Republican party, if I may pair the very weak with the very strong, is that we were all so concerned about supporting bipartisan policy, which it really was--a vital interest in Viet Nam--that for various reasons we didn't subject him at home to some of the critical analysis I think perhaps ought to have been made and wasn't made. In other words, I think mainly my shortcomings here were ones of omission.

M: Mr. White, I do believe you mentioned this before about some areas of disagreement on domestic policy, and I'm not sure I asked you what they were specifically.

W: For example, I thought that the Poverty Program was too big, bit off too much, promised too much out, I'm positive, of his sense of compassion. But I thought in some aspects of it, particularly Job Corps, were ill administered, and in some cases, positively wrong. I thought matters like rent supplement, which is to say a federal subsidy for rent, were extreme. I had reservations about Medicare in the sense that I thought it was rather too all inclusive, not that I didn't think the principle was right, and so on. But to tell you the truth, most all of my vital energy, whatever I had, was for some time really given over almost exclusively to trying to defend the policy in Viet Nam. And this is not because it was Johnson's policy. It was because I thought it was absolutely indispensable.

M: Would you tell me why?

W: Yes, because I think that the ultimate meaning of our intervention there was not to allow the violently dangerous Chinese Communist doctrine to prevail in this world and particularly in Asia. Namely, the Russians for whatever reason had become relatively civilized in respect to the West, relatively so. But the Russians were under profound constituent pressure and demagogic pressure to be "really tough," so to speak, as were the Chinese Communists. We really staked ourselves in there primarily and historically because we could not allow the Chinese doctrine to prevail lest it infect this monolith of the Soviet Union and destroy the whole bloody world. That's what I felt.

This is quite apart from the issue of the right of local self-determination, which is a genuine issue. I thought this was no less important than what was belatedly done to stop Hitler, because I thought if we allowed what was really naked aggression--and proxy aggression at that, namely, really directed by the Chinese--in Viet Nam, there would be no end to it and eventually we'd have a Third World War that would finish it all off. This is exactly the reason I felt this was absolutely obligatory to defend it at any cost.

- M: In conversation with Mr. Johnson, did you conclude that these were essentially his motivations?
- W: Yes, I did, although he was always most cautious not to go into the Chinese thing for obvious reasons. He didn't wish to be provocative. He didn't wish to go out of his way to rub them up because of course that would have been foolish. But he understood what the game was about. Of course, he did. The game was really that. We simply couldn't sit supine and let this infinitely menacing force overrun, first Southeast Asia, and then possibly, as I say, so infect the Soviet Union. After all nothing succeeds like success. If the Soviet Union saw these fellows could get away with it in Asia, we feared they'd take up the same policy and get away with it elsewhere. I say "we", I mean he did, and so collaterally and independently did I and many others.
- M: Mr. White, if we have a negotiated political settlement, does that mean that we have only realized time?
- W: Yes, I suppose so, but I think that's not too bad a thing. One never does do much more in foreign affairs than realize time. After all, that's about all we did in Korea, and I think that was a tolerable settlement. Even in the second World War, we quite wisely did not really follow out the doctrine of total unconditional surrender. If we had, we'd have extirpated Germany and we didn't do that. No, nothing's ideal. This, I think, is a tolerable solution. And that's all that President Johnson was really seeking, was a tolerable solution. One can't make absolutes in this field. One can't be absolutely secure. One can't have absolute victories in anything like that.
- M: Did you see a particular change or trend in Mr. Johnson's thinking, changing from a military settlement to some sort of a political settlement?
- W: I don't think there ever was the slightest change in his position. I know it has been said there was, but I don't think there was. He entered it and left it with one notion, that he would stop the overt aggression on an independent country, or what should be an independent country; that he would accept and indeed welcome a solution that gave self-determination to South Viet Nam in a genuine sense and left them free of sheerly naked physical assault. And that's all he wanted, and that's all most of the Viet Nam hawks so-called wanted. And I don't think he has changed in the slightest on any matter of principle, although I know it is said in retrospect that he did. I don't think he did that at all. I don't see any change really.
- M: Do you think Mr. Johnson had any particular stronger reliance on military advice as opposed to civilian--?
- W: No, quite the contrary. I think his whole inclination--here's another irony about him. The President's whole background, as I mentioned earlier I think, was essentially Populist,

which is to say it was strongly tinged by skepticism about war. The Populists were more or less isolationists. He was never an isolationist. But the President's personal and private instincts were of remarkably peaceful nature. He never was a gungho war type. He simply became seized of a vast problem, and he got all the advice he could. It remains true that the soundest and the most experienced, and, in my opinion, the most responsible Americans in and out of the military believed in this policy. I might add that I've known most of the Senate for a good many years, and most of the people who supported this matter in the Senate are men in whom I have the most general respect. And most of those who opposed it are men toward whom I have the least general respect. That's simply a somewhat offhand and flat assertion, but for whatever it's worth, that's what I've always thought. In other words, most of the men in the Congress who have stood up for Viet Nam are men I have known.

I don't wish, by the way, to suggest that the doves, I think, are evil. I simply think they're not in my opinion, in the sense I've given, as I've outlined here, as reliable as are the other people--or I might add as manly, although I suppose that's a little bit odd.

M: Mr. White, I just have a couple more rather concluding questions. One thing I'd like to ask you--you've known Mr. Johnson a good many years. What changes have you seen develop in him as a man?

W: That's a very big question, isn't it! Of course, as he has gotten older, as we all get older, there are changes. In a political sense, in the philosophic sense, I have not seen any great changes. I think at the end his political philosophy was basically what it was at the beginning. Mind you, when he was in the House and in the Senate, he was from Texas. His constituency was different, and he wasn't as liberal as he was later, but that was because he couldn't be. I don't think his mind was changed. I think circumstances changed.

I can't think of any substantial really vast changes in him over these years. There are obviously changes in his fortune and in his status. I thought perhaps in the last year or two in office he changed in the human sense in a way. He became a great deal more melancholy than he had been before in private moments, and not altogether because of the degree of failure of his Administration, but he became terribly concerned objectively about the country. He was very concerned about--deeply and sadly concerned--about what he thought was a sense of rejection of patriotism among many people; what he thought, as I said earlier, was an almost brutality toward the men in Viet Nam by so many people at home; and by what he believed was a strongly irresponsible attitude among responsible people--people in responsible position, notably in the Senate. It was not a personal thing with him. It wasn't solely that they'd caused him a lot of trouble. He was gravely concerned about this.

He left office, I think, in a substantially very melancholy state of mind--and not by

any means wholly personal. I know it had a lot to do with his honest concern for the country. When he assisted Mr. Nixon in all of this transition, he did this with great magnanimity and with great concern for the country. There's no doubt about that. Mr. Nixon knows this. I think if he were interviewed, or could be interviewed, he'd certainly agree. I think he left power with a strongly elegiac sense that he was very, very much concerned for his country, and felt that he had done all he could and hoped that things would improve.

But when he left here, it was an immensely sad thing for those who knew him; and not simply because he was out and somebody else was in, but because of the concern one had to have for what had happened to him, how it had happened. He was not rejected on sound grounds, of course, mind you. Of course, he didn't run. But he really was forced out of office. It was tragic, the way in which he was forced out. I'm not discussing now whether he was right or wrong. But if a President can be forced out, as he was, in the way he was, we all ought to be concerned. And he was concerned. And he was concerned a great deal more than for a man named Lyndon Johnson. Those are about the changes--If those are changes, that's what has occurred.

M: Mr. White, do you think that Mr. Johnson was particularly aware or sensitive to how history would treat him, record his Administration?

W: I think he himself is not clear, that he wonders how it will, of course. I think on some days--he's more or less like any other man I suppose, on some days he has a basically optimistic view, and I suppose on other days he does not. I believe he believes, as was true, that the record about Viet Nam was enormously distorted, contemporaneously, and that one day it will be clearer, and that his betting is, if one can use a rather crude term about it, that he will come out well there in history.

I believe he believes that he has already come out well in history in the domestic sense, in the sense of his domestic achievements. I also believe that he himself now wonders if some of them weren't a little too far--if he didn't go a bit too far in some things too fast. I think that if in the impossible eventuality he were doing it all over again that he'd be a little slower domestically.

But all this really goes back to the fact that nobody will understand Lyndon Johnson unless he understands that he was profoundly marked by early poverty of his own and of his friends, and that he has tremendous feeling for the deprived that is absolutely genuine and has absolutely very little political connection. He knew perfectly well that a lot of the things he did domestically were not good politics.

He knew for example that a good politician--good politics would have been to have been far tougher on the law and order issue than he was, and he knew that, but he wouldn't do it. He wouldn't do it because he's essentially a defense juror. He's always in

favor of the underdog. While, of course, this is sometimes a useful political device, sometimes it isn't. And it wasn't with him. I thought among his other mistakes that he should have taken a stronger position on law and order. I don't mean be a lyncher or a bully, but I think he was too soft. But I think it proceeded not from a political motive, but almost from the opposite; that he was aware that it was bad politics, but his sense of compassion got in the way, in this case, I think, of his sense of judgement.

M: Mr. White, I don't have any further questions. Do you have further comments on anything we've discussed or have not gotten to talk about?

W: No, I think maybe I'd like to make one final sort of summary statement to this effect, that I think President Johnson--I may have said this before, but in any case--was the most inherently talented public man I've known; that he did of course have faults, that he was too urgent, that he was often too tactless, but this his faults were, at any rate, big faults. There was nothing little about him. When he had a fault, he had a very big one.

Curiously enough I think one of the reasons he didn't go down better politically was that his faults were highly masculine faults, and that our society is becoming increasingly less masculine; that there's a certain femininity about--I'm not speaking in crude terms of sexual aberration--in our society that he didn't fit into that, because he was in a sense a kind of American Henry VIII. I mean to say, if he wanted to belch at the table, he belched at the table, and so on. His shortcomings were not the polite, pleasant, little shortcomings, but the big ones--high temper, of course; too driving a personality, both of others and himself; too perfectionist by far. But in short, when they made him they never made a little man, they made a very big one--with equivalent faults. But I never knew him in all my acquaintance with him to do a really little thing. I've known him to do things that were infuriating, of course. Nor have I ever known him to pick on a small person in a small situation. At least he chose his adversaries of equivalent size, and I think that's a pretty good epitaph for him. I think that's all I have to say about him.

M: Thank you very much.

W: I might, on second thought, add a little personal thing about the President's relationship with his wife, which had its amusing aspects. He was, as the expression goes, quite a handful for a wife to deal with in the sense that he was always so preoccupied, of course, with his career. He would, for example, think nothing of inviting eight or nine people to dinner and not telling her until they hit the front door when he was at the Senate. This would sort of throw her, of course. His whole attitude was that he didn't know anything about these matters, and he always did truly seem quite oblivious to ordinary domestic problems--household problems. He always seemed to think that somewhere and somehow the food would appear. Of course it wasn't his responsibility.

And Mrs. Johnson--Bird, as he called her--was extremely skillful at handling him,

particularly when he was upset or angry or tired or depressed. She never frontally challenged him on anything, but she had her way very often by a very soft manner of getting around him. I remember on one occasion we were at the White House, just my wife and myself and the Johnsons, for supper, and she did something, asked him to do something, or got him to do something he didn't like. And he said to me in great indignation, "You see what I've had to put up with from that woman!"

I said, "Yes, Mr. President. It's shameful the way that big bully has brutalized you all these years." And he laughed at that point.

Here again, he was a very old-fashioned type. He was very much pater familias in that house, both to his daughters and to his wife. It was not a Chinese household, but very much of a traditional "Papa knows best" attitude. Mrs. Johnson, as I said, always managed--whatever way she got, she managed it by indirection. I don't think I ever heard her directly repudiate him in anything or directly dispute him. What she would do was occasionally, for example, when he was angry and out of sorts, if he'd had a bad day as President, and he had problems on the Hill and what not, and somebody had done him in, or he thought--he'd say very harsh things about him, that person, and she'd say, "Now, Lyndon, don't you think--don't you really believe," and so on. And finally he would smile and sort of withdraw it.

There was a very useful association between those people, between that couple, because Mrs. Johnson had the gentleness that he lacked and was very often through his life the agent for bringing him back together with people with whom he'd broken. She once said to me, "I will not take on Lyndon's animosities or quarrels because I don't want him to lose any friends." And wherever he seemed about to lose a friend, a genuine friend, she would invariably come into the picture some way and bring him back together with that friend. It's a small sidelight on their purely domestic life, perhaps one that has some historical meaning.

M: Mr. White, you did mention the Dixie express in conversation with me once. Was there something?

W: Oh, yes, Mrs. Johnson participated in the campaign of 1964 and went South on, I think they called it the Dixie Express. She took the train, and the President was both very pleased with her success, and I thought in a slight way somewhat jealous of it, because, as I said earlier, in that house he was the king pin and no mistake about it.

Of course, obviously, basically he was very proud of her and very pleased too, but I think he didn't particularly like it when people suggested that she'd made a major contribution, or perhaps one as big as he'd made.

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