

**Lee C. White Oral History Interview –JFK #7, 5/11/1970**  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

White, Lee C.; Legislative assistant to John F. Kennedy (1954-1957); assistant to Joseph P. Kennedy, member of the Hoover Commission (1954-1955); Counsel, Small Business Committee, Senate (1957-1958); Assistant Special Counsel to the President (1961-1963). White discusses the Area Redevelopment Administration, the Accelerated Public Works Program, and the reorganization of the Business Council. He also discusses differences between the Kennedy Administration and the Johnson Administration, among other issues.

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Lee C. White – JFK #7

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Seventh Oral History Interview

with

LEE C. WHITE

May 11, 1970  
Washington, D.C.

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: There are a few areas that I want to go over, and preferably fairly quickly. I'd like you to talk for a minute or two, if you will, about the whole effort on aid to depressed areas that was one of the campaign promises, I suppose, or had been in the works before the Kennedy Administration came in -- things like the Douglas [Paul H. Douglas] bill that had failed in the previous Congress and then finally came through, and that kind of thing. But I'd like to ask you to talk about it specifically in two

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terms: one, the kind of success you think the effort had, where its shortcomings were; and secondly, some of the problems in getting the bureaucracy geared up to deal with it. I have some specific questions on the latter. Would you talk generally about the successes and shortcomings of the program?

WHITE: Yes. Well, it's a little hard for me to evaluate it because it's still going on. Yet there was a certainly active role that Senator John Kennedy played, partly because of his natural interest in the problem that stemmed from the campaign when he ran against Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr.]. At that time, as you know, there were a lot of textile mills and other New England outfits that were being lured to the South.

In fact the first time I ever heard Senator Kennedy speak was at a Chamber of Commerce meeting in Chattanooga, arranged by his old friend Charlie

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Bartlett [Charles L. Bartlett], at which he told the people from the Southeast, "You'd better be a little leery of any company that you can seduce to leave Massachusetts and come down here." I don't remember if he used that particular figure of speech about seduction and, you know, what happens to men who are seduced by attractive women, only to be captured and then discarded. But it turns out that he was a bit of a prophet. When Douglas left the Labor [and Public Welfare] Committee in the Senate to take something he couldn't resist, namely the Senate Finance Committee spot, he sort of handed the ball to Senator Kennedy, who was delighted, and I think probably did help. I remember the one incident in connection with the defeat, during the Eisenhower years, of the legislation. It had gone through the Senate, was in the House up for debate on the rule that permitted anybody to shoot it down. There was a hurried phone call in

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the Speaker's office with somebody from the Commerce Department. I don't know if it was the Secretary or the Assistant Secretary; I think it was some Assistant Secretary whose name, if I ever knew it, and I did, slid out of my memory. But that guy -- whoever he was -- at the other end of the line just said no, and that was the end of that damn thing.

MOSS: Yes, I believe Levitan [Sar A. Levitan] mentions this in his book when he's talking about the legislation -- Sar Levitan.

WHITE: Yes, Sar was awful close to it, the whole damn shebang. Certainly the West Virginia piece of it, as romantic as it is, was valid. The Senator did see things that shocked him. He was grateful to them for that essential boost they gave him along his political trail at the right time, where had they gone the other way, who knows what history would have written? But they went that way, and

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he was not unmindful of it.

MOSS: Yes, I've wondered about that often, because it's almost become hackneyed to say that West Virginia had a great impact on John Kennedy.

WHITE: I don't discount that a bit. I think everything that's said about it is valid. Just a little bit more historical, the first Executive order draft or proclamation that was ordered in guess it was January 21st, 1961. It was some sort of a routine damn thing that just had to be done, and somebody with a sense of proportions and drama,

said, "No, to hell with that. That won't be the first one, there's got to be another first one." I don't even remember exactly what the order related to, but the first one under President Kennedy -- I think it was on Saturday, January 21, 1961 -- related to the area development -- or I guess maybe it was called distressed or depressed areas then.

MOSS: As I recall reading somewhere, there was some

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confusion in the executive office as to just how you get an Executive order out at the time.

WHITE: Indeed there was. Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman] was handling it, and our little offices, of course, which adjoined were trying to figure out what the hell to do. And I think, as always is the case like that, a fellow by the name of Bill Hopkins [William J. Hopkins] came to the rescue and straightened it out. Bill Hopkins is of course the secret weapon of anti-chaos. He's the one oasis of common sense and imperturbability and just an absolute treasure house of experience. The guy knows everything. And if anybody in the White House goofs up -- for example when, oh, not too long ago President Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] announced he was naming three men to two jobs. Well, it was a mechanical mistake that can happen, but I just know without having been there, somebody just didn't clear it with Hopkins.

Anyhow, that was the beginning of the Kennedy

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Administration. And then there were sincere efforts to begin to get that economy moving in the right direction. President Nixon said last Friday how he's doing great: he's only up to 4.8 percent, and we had 5.7. Now, I don't know, I can't remember whether that's accurate, but...

MOSS: It's approximately accurate. It was between 5.6 and 5.8 during those years, yes.

WHITE: As I remember, it was higher in the tail end of the Eisenhower Administration, and the important thing is that it got down. As to the specific programs, there were numerous ones. I think the one that is perhaps most dramatic was the accelerated public works proposal. In fact my partner, Milton Semer, is one of the experts in it. He was then general counsel for the Housing Agency, and they were among the groups who were sort of put together in an informal task force to make

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this damn thing run. Money got out very, very rapidly. It's one of those rare instances where an administration did not get in the way of program contemplation.

MOSS: There's one complaint that Levitan makes in his book on APW [Accelerated Public Works Program], and that is that it was administratively dumped on top of ARA [Area Redevelopment Administration] when they really weren't capable of handling it. They weren't geared up to take that much. Do you corroborate that, or do you have any view on it?

WHITE: No, I can't corroborate it, and I have a view, but I'm going to say it shakes me, because Levitan was as close an observer of this as anybody and he's made a career of it, whereas in my case it is one of those things that flitted by on my own radar screen occasionally. But I had the impression that it was not dumped on ARA to handle. In fact, as I said, people like

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Milt Semer were working together with guys like Charlie Schultze [Charles L. Schultze] -- who was then Assistant Director of the Budget Bureau, not the Director -- to see it that the damn thing did go. And there was an awful lot of executive office development. Nobody just sort of said, "Well, now that this thing is enacted and the money's made available, we'll forget about it and let ARA do it."

It was not exactly a case of like war, being too important to be left to generals, that this program was too important to be left to the ones that were set up to do it. It was more that it had come to a priority level. There was every effort and desire at the top of the government front eh President and people around him to see to it that the commitments were made and the money flowed and that the red tape and the administrative snarls that frequently accompany programs like that be held to a minimum.

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And I believe that they were. I think of it as....

MOSS: Okay, what kinds of snarls did you have to untangle? Can you think of specific instances?

WHITE: Oh, I didn't do it myself. I wasn't really kind of at the center of that. But there were allocations, for example, of who got what. And I think, without being able to document it or event to recall any specific illustration, that people n Larry O'Brien's [Lawrence F. O'Brien] office, the Congressional and semi-political wing of the White House staff, were working very closely with members of Congress and the Senate whose districts were especially concerned, and begin to use Milton Semer. A guy like that could be told, "Here's an area, and they've got a proposal that makes sense. Let's get that thing going."

MOSS: Okay. Now on the public works and on the ARA end of things, there was a lot



of competition amongst, say, congressmen to get

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something for their district, and so on. Where was this handled? How was the sorting out of who had the best claim and where the priority should go, where was this done and by whom?

WHITE: I can't be very flat about it, but I can just give you an impressionistic answer to that. I think probably a combination of places: one of them being a guy like Henry Wilson who was watching the House of Representatives, who knew the people over there, and who himself was from North Carolina, where at least part of it was in difficulty. So there was some political input. But I think basically, even if a district were represented by a congressman who was giving the Administration a hard time all along the route, if their situation was such that there was a bad employment record there or bad figures, and the projects that they proposed were good, that it went. I don't think that politics went in it to the extent that it was solely the criteria or even the most important.

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I just think of it as one of the factors. What really did govern, I think was where the need was best demonstrated, and more importantly, where the local people working with the federal boodle dispensers could come up with those programs that made most sense. Some communities were all set and ready to go with plans that had been shelved and now they were capable of being taken off the shelf.

MOSS: Okay, there was another political split, or an economic one I suppose, between the industrial areas and the rural areas, the rural areas feeling that they were perhaps getting the short end of the stick on this whole business and wanting a bigger piece of the pie than the original intent was. How was this handled? Let's say a guy like Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] who was making noises this way.

WHITE: I really have no recollection of it. I assume that there was some effort to not let the program

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go lopsided, but I just don't recall having sat in on any discussions where that was either one of the topics or certainly where it was resolved. It may have been, I just don't remember.

MOSS: Another area, this time within the bureaucracy, and how you get the different organizations to work together -- you have an outfit like ARA, which is

located in [the Department of] Commerce, but in fact it has to draw on resources from other agencies and other departments. There was some talk that [the Department of] Agriculture, because it did not get the agency, was holding back on support, not being as cooperative as it might have been in turning men loose to work with the program, providing budget slots for resources, and this kind of thing. Did you get into this much or do you recall much of this?

WHITE: No, I really don't, but, as I think I've already indicated to you probably on a half dozen different instances, the large part of it, in my view,

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is people. And Bill Batt [William L. Batt, Jr.], bless his heart, had been around. He knew how to call people in the White House, and for the most part his calls were taken. To use your illustration of Agriculture, I have a hunch that a guy like Jim Sundquist [James L. Sundquist] who probably was running that program over there, if not running it at least was the guy that you could call, well, Bill Batt had known Sundquist forever -- both of them from Pennsylvania and allied in part with Clark [Joseph S. Clark]. So if there were those problems, and I'm sure that they had to exist with things being what they are, it didn't really jump up and grab me very often. I don't remember Bill Blatt bitching very much about that.

MOSS: I was wondering how often this kind of thing actually got bumped up to the White House level, or how often they really solved it amongst themselves?

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WHITE: Yes, well, guys like Hal Williams [Harold W. Williams] and Bill Batt, who'd been around the track a few times, who knew people.... That really -- as I think I indicated -- is one of the reasons I believe that the Kennedy group got off to such a good start. There were so many people in various government agencies who had known each other from earlier experiences, either in working in the congressional committees or working for individual senators, or because they were, like Batt, kind of an outside expert. It made the startup time and takeoff time a lot less, because people really did know each other and had a good feel for one another, and I think generally there was a spirit of camaraderie. I'm positive that bureaucratic jealousies wove their way in, but at least from my lofty perch I didn't see a hell of a lot of it.

MOSS: Okay. Now, how far along was the whole depressed areas business getting into what later became to

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be known as the War on Poverty? How well developed were the War on Poverty OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity] antecedents in the Kennedy Administration? Was the groundwork all laid and all Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] had to do was press a couple of buttons and let it flow, or was there still a great deal of work to be done when he came in?

WHITE: Well, there had been a lot of talk about it, of course, a lot of discussion. One of the things that I happened to be involved in was the meeting set up by the President, agreed to by President Kennedy -- I don't know when he agreed to it but it was scheduled for December, 5, 6, or 7 1963 -- with the governors from the Appalachian area. And one of the things I remember putting in a note to the new President Johnson sort of bringing him up to date in all the little threads that I had in my hand that I was working on involved that particular meeting. At first he didn't want to meet with them, cancelled

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it, I think, and then it was rescheduled. Of course, Frank Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.] played a pretty big role. We always thought that he was blessed that he had John Sweeney with him. John was a pretty good nuts and bolts man who kept his eye on things, and Frank was more of a political-bull-in-the-china-closet type, you know, crashed around.

MOSS: Yes. You're mentioning Frank Roosevelt, you don't recall a situation in which he had things pretty well fouled up with Curran [Joseph E. Curran] of the Maritime Union [National Maritime Union of America], do you?

WHITE: No, but it certainly wouldn't come as a surprise to me. Mike Feldman spent most time with maritime matters. In fact, Mike gets the credit for that wonderful statement in President Johnson's State of the Union message promising a maritime program, which, as far as I know, never did get set up and still hasn't gotten set up. But Johnson

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can tell you all about that.

MOSS: Yes, okay. Getting off into, again, a related area, and that's the whole housing and urban affairs business. There was an effort to reduce FHA [Federal Housing Administration] interest rates in order to spur the economy, was there not? How difficult was it to get this going, or was this simply a pro forma thing?

WHITE: Not very. No, it was more than a pro forma, but it wasn't difficult. There was a sort of -- I don't think it's secret but I don't remember hearing much about it

-- a little cluster of people headed by -- I'm not sure "headed by" is right. But somewhere in the process the Budget Bureau, Bob Turner [Robert C. Turner], who was Charlie Schultze's predecessor as the Assistant Director in the economic chair, Kermit Gordon, who was then a member of the Council of Economic Advisers and sort of designated by Walter Heller to be the guy to worry with this, would meet with a group from Housing, which always

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included Bob Weaver [Robert C. Weaver] and Milt Semer, somebody from the [Federal] Home Loan Bank Board. Joe McMurray [Joseph P. McMurray] would almost always attend and bring a couple of his knowledgeable experts Stan Baughman [J. Stanley Baughman] from the Fannie Mae [Federal National Mortgage Association], the VA [Veteran's Administration] types would come' normally it would be guys like occasionally Driver [W.J. Driver] who was then deputy to Gleason [John S. Gleason], and Phil Brownstein who was head of the [Department of Veterans Benefits] Benefits Bureau or some damn thing like that, but obviously very knowledgeable in the VA housing program. I was there, not because I knew anything about it, but to sort of make it a White House operation.

You sit and listen to those guys, and it always reminded me of the weatherman at night on TV. He talks about the counterclockwise movement of the air and the way the lows and the highs are moving. Then when he gets done with all that, if he came out with saying it's going to snow, I'd accept it,

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or if he said it's not going to snow, I'd accept that too. You know, it's special type of jargon.

Oh, there's one other participant there who made a hell of a lot of sense, a guy by the name of Roosa [Robert V. Roosa], Bob Roosa, the Under Secretary of Treasury for Monetary, Financial matters. I think that in those discussions -- and I would say that certainly Kermit Gordon played a very constructive role in sort of chairing the meetings and getting people to talk about the right issues -- I don't remember any dissent. That truly was one of those efforts where consensus seemed to emerge, and again, focusing on results, I think probably with sound results. They dropped interest rates at a time when it made sense to do it, and they had the desired effect.

MOSS: Was there any input at all from the Fed [Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System] from Martin [William McC. Martin, Jr.] and those people? Any counterbalancing on

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monetary policy?

WHITE: I don't remember ever seeing anybody from the Federal Reserve Board staff

sitting there, or from the Board itself, of course. But I think that the Administration's link with the Board was Bob Roosa, and Bob was always aware of their thinking, of what they were doing, and so forth. I don't know what kind of communication link he played, but my recollection is that whenever anybody wanted to know what the Fed thought or was likely to do or how they would respond, it was Roosa who was speculating on that.

MOSS: I think it's Alsop [Stewart Alsop] in his book on the center talks about a troika meeting involving Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon] and Heller and Martin and sometimes someone else -- I forget just who -- who would talk about the Administration and its monetary and fiscal policies.

WHITE: Oh yes, that was a.... I don't think it was any secrets. It was....

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MOSS: It was quite a regular thing.

WHITE: Yes, it was open.

MOSS: And how useful was it?

WHITE: If there were three of them there they called it the troika, if there were four of them they called it the quadriad. And the fourth one was the budget director.

MOSS: Was it a very useful coordinating vehicle?

WHITE: Oh, I believe so, but just partly again my continual bias about people. I think that those guys you just ticked off are all pretty damned able. When they sat in the room, there was an awful lot of knowledge -- collective knowledge and insight and experience and judgment. I think it made sense to have them come together and focus on economic issues. And I must say, if results are the standard by which you measure the success of processes, it was a pretty goddamn successful process, because with all the other headaches, there's nobody associated

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with the Kennedy Administration who doesn't take pride in the way you had all these month after month and year after year of constant economic growth.

Since we're focusing on the Kennedy Administration, I don't know what would have happened if President Kennedy had gotten himself into the Vietnam mess that President Johnson did, and whether or not he would have moved earlier on the tax matters where Johnson did not. I think the conventional wisdom is that that was a mistake on the President's part. I don't know enough about the factors that went into President Johnson's decision to

delay. But whatever the explanation, I think hindsight now suggests that we might not be in the deep economic dilemmas that we presently have and that President Johnson passed on to President Nixon. As one who's trained as a lawyer and who spent most of his life as a bureaucrat and who had a natural suspicion

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of and disdain for economists, I had to alter my judgment. I think some of those economists that came in with the Kennedy Administration -- certainly all the members of the council -- Walter Heller and Tobin [James Tobin], Jim Tobin, and Kermit Gordon and Charlie Schultze and that whole group, I think were just extremely impressive men. These guys were thoughtful and analytical and, I think, they served President Kennedy exceedingly well.

MOSS: On the Housing and Urban Development and so on, the standard public story is that the President went ahead and said, "Yes, Weaver is going to be the man if I get my Department of Housing and Urban Development," and this was what killed it in Congress, because it seemed to be a play for a Negro in the Cabinet. Is this valid?

WHITE: I think that's not far from the mark. The President wanted a department of housing. I think it was not a very wise thing to have gone through a

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reorganization plan, because I don't really believe that's what reorganization plans had in mind, and, of course, subsequently people learned that you just can't get them to accept that. I don't know if they should. I think the creation of a department ought to come by way of legislation instead of a take it or leave it basis. I believe that it was right, that it was a political decision on President Kennedy's part to stick it to those bastards. If they were going to do the departmental approach in, he was going to let it be known that they had an extra burden in doing it.

MOSS: Was there anything more to that story that you can recall, in talking with congressman, say, trying to line up support for the thing? Any particular sticky places that you got involved?

WHITE: I don't have any recollections along that line. I think that that's one where Larry O'Brien's

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people had most of the burden, and particular characters that you had to work with there were not those that I had any special link with.

MOSS: Okay. You were talking a little earlier about this troika thing. Let me move to another process or organization that did not work very well, the Business Advisory Council that you inherited, or Luther Hodges inherited and that he tried to open up. The businessmen turned around and said, "No, we'll have none of that" and formed their own Business Council. Was the President generally in sympathy with Hodges' attempt to open the thing up, or was this something that Hodges himself initiated and the President had to deal with after the fact?

WHITE: I don't know. That's something that Mike Feldman would be able to give you a better answer on. I plain don't know. If I had to speculate I would think that the President probably didn't initiate it, but

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certainly had no problem with it conceptually. There's something disagreeable about the government having secret meetings with people whose fortunes go up and down depending upon government policy. This is not to suggest, however, that the problem is a simple one. It's very difficult, very complex, for the obvious reason that if you do not afford secrecy or confidentiality to the data, then you simply don't get the same type of candor in the discussions and there's not quite the same quality. Now I don't see anything necessarily inherently evil in that, but it simply puts -- it makes it difficult. And that's one of the reasons that I think President Kennedy undertook, by executive order, to set out guidelines that would help govern relationships with industry advisory committees.

My own narrower, limited experience with the Federal Power Commission, I chafed under this very same dilemma. It's not an easy one.

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You can have sessions with industry groups, which I thought were constructive, and yet it is not a comfortable feeling to have to respect some of these confidences and to be doing your business, in essence, behind closed doors. I don't know the solution. I think that the guidelines that were set out by President Kennedy are helpful, but they don't solve the problems because I think basically they're insoluble. You've got to make some decisions that cut through there in a fashion that is not totally acceptable to both extremes.

MOSS: Okay. Now, after the Business Advisory Council went out the window and the Business Council was set up independently, representatives of the Business Council would come and talk to the President from time to time, in effect going around Hodges and straight to the President. Did this really undercut Hodges' position? Did it leave him in an awkward....

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WHITE: Well, again, I'm not as conversant with this as.... Because although I had

some dealings with Commerce, it was not one of my primary areas, I think you would get a better feel on these issues from Mike Feldman who did spend more time. But that isn't stopping me from giving an opinion anyhow, and that is that -- again, you've just got to accept my heavy prejudice -- Hodges really couldn't be undercut because I don't think the President ever thought he was all that damned good. You know, Luther is a fine fellow, but in that case of characters, he just wasn't a brilliant standout. He didn't sparkle. He was not the sort of fellow that I think that Kennedy was likely to call up on the telephone when he had a tough problem involving business. More likely than not he'd first call Walter Heller, or his brother, or Ted Sorensen, or Dave Bell [David E. Bell], Moss, or Arthur [Arthur Goldberg], or anybody. This is not to suggest that Luther Hodges

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is a dolt or anything like that. Again, it's one of the evils, not evils, one of the burdens of trying to administer a massive government. Every President has got only so many hours that he can devote and he likes to use them efficiently. There were times when I know when I was telling him things he wasn't paying any attention, because he figured it took me so damn long to get my thoughts out, he didn't have that kind of time to devote to the problems I was working on. And I think Luther Hodges probably took as long to say hello as I did. The President didn't like you to say hello, he wanted to start talking right away.

WHITE: Yes, I've heard this in other contexts too, that he liked to be brief and to the point and like everything else to be brief and to the point. [Interruption] Let me ask you to.... I know there isn't any such thing as a typical day, but can you reminisce and give me something of the flavor of what it was like to work in the White House as a

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Deputy [Assistant] Special Counsel? The question shouldn't be, what was a typical day like," but that kind of thing.

WHITE: Well, you're right. There is no one day that perhaps -- at least I couldn't remember one particular day that I would pull out and take the calendar and tick off the particular meetings and phone calls and other things that happened. But I think I can give you a couple of general impressions that might be of interest. [Interruption] First of all there's a sense of excitement that exists in the job. Oh, it may wane over a period of time, but there's up and down times of great excitement and exhilaration and a sense of participation or, at least, vicarious participation in the major decisions of the world. It's the tempo, the beat, the pulse, the atmosphere was highly charged. It was great fun, great fun. I think I may have suggested that one of the differences between the Kennedy

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Administration and the Johnson Administration was that fun element. In my view it just didn't seem to be as much fun. Now part of it, of course, is because the mind of man always remembers the positive and tends to minimize the negative. It's one of those characteristics of mankind that lets him continue. Hell, if it were otherwise we'd probably all be depressed and subject to suicidal waves. Partly, too, the passage of time does take a little of the edge off the excitement, but with those two major qualifications, which I don't think amount to a hell of a lot, there was simply more fun in the Kennedy White House. There was a little brighter atmosphere.

These were total things, I can't take individuals and break them apart, because I can tick off some guys in the Johnson White House staff who were as thoroughly delightful and personable. Bill Moyers, for example, is one of the greatest practical jokers there is. He's got just an

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absolutely delightful sense of humor, just fun to be around. But taken as groups....

One element in the Kennedy Administration that was so damn enjoyable was that fun content. There were periods when it got pretty badly cuffed around. It wasn't a hell of a lot of fun, you know, immediately after the Bay of Pigs, when everybody was shell-shocked. Of course, during the Cuban Missile Crisis everybody began to be very tense because it looked like we might, you know, be blown to bits. There was, for me, a great thrill in being able to talk to the guys that were making decisions.

One of the little things that stick in my mind, for example, as perhaps illustrative of this was a telephone conversation that I had one afternoon with Vice President Lyndon Johnson. Lyndon Johnson was interested in knowing what had happened to a great big river project in Texas. He'd understood, and rightly, that the thing was

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somewhere around my office. It was the sort of thing I would be dealing with. So he called me to give me a little pep talk on it. Well, believe it or not, I had a memo to get down to the President, and as the Vice President was sort of discoursing about this I thought to myself, "Isn't it a shame that my poor father is dead and not able to realize that his son is in the wonderful position of trying to figure out how the hell to get the Vice President of the United States off the telephone so he can get his work done," which is exactly what I was doing. And finally, I just had to break in and tell him that he had to forgive me, but I just had to get, which I did, it down there. And that was, I say, probably represented my own personal view about the tremendous privilege of being able to work in the White House staff.

Of course each guy wants to be associated with the best of everything. When I worked for a

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Republican senator, I was certainly mindful of the fact that he was probably the most respected Republican senator. When I worked for a Democratic senator who turned out to be President, that was pretty good too. And when I was working for a President who by all odds was far more exciting, dramatic and perhaps even successful than his predecessor, why, that too added to the aura of being a first-class operation. I think we did have the feeling that with all of the weaknesses and deficiencies and other problems, it was first-class. There was precious little internal posturing. I'm sure there had to be some knifing. I wasn't really aware, however, of very much of it.

MOSS: Okay. You said it was really fun during the Kennedy years, and you indicated that there was a change in the Johnson years. What exactly was this change, and to what do you attribute it?

WHITE: Well, I'm sure there are a whole host of factors,

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not the least of which is the fact that the grief that came from the assassination, just that factor in its own right is monumental. And for all I know, without it, if President Kennedy had finished his term and decided for any reason he didn't want to run and Vice President Johnson had been elected President, chances are I wouldn't have been on the White House staff, that it would have been a totally different situation. So that part of it was that. Part of it was simply the style of operation, the change of characters. Part of it was a little stress that developed among the old Kennedy people. Those who took the course that I took said, in effect, "When President Johnson said to me, 'Look, I know that you were here with President Kennedy. I know how grief-stricken you are, as all of us are. But if he needed you, I need you more. So stay.'" Well, in my own mind I don't believe I would have remained in the White House staff in the

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second Kennedy term. I think I would have looked for either an outside job or a different spot within the executive, partly because the staff role was one that I'd been in, there's no better staff job, but I wanted to fly out on my own. The way I play the game you can't fly out on your own when you're on the staff. But I didn't have any specific plans. And when President Johnson asked me to stay, I certainly took him at his word, I believed him. And it made sense, and I must say I'll not wave the patriotic flag, but how the hell could anybody turn him down? I didn't believe that he had killed President Kennedy or that he was glad by his death or anything else. So I remained.

MOSS: Were there people who felt that way?

WHITE: I don't know of anyone who ever suggested to me, either by word or deed, that they really believed that he had any hand in it or that he had secretly

enjoyed it. That's too hard a thought, and I

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cannot believe that there's anyone, even those who were the most severe critics of President Johnson, who would have harbored those thoughts. It just strikes me as outside of the bounds of rational behavior.

MOSS:           Okay. Now, generally, it's believed, I think, that the people of the old Kennedy staff who were toughest on Johnson were people like Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] and Sorensen and O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell.] Is this the case of characters?

WHITE:          Well Schlesinger, of course, didn't stay. He left right away, and he should have. It was not his dish of tea. Arthur did not have a sort of an operating responsibility. He was at the ball park, but he wasn't in the ball game. To some extent he may have been pulled in occasionally to serve as liaison with Ambassador Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson], or other matters. Certainly he had every opportunity to express his views and get his thoughts

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in the mixmaster, so that I wouldn't want to minimize or demean Arthur's contribution. And there were some times when I asked him to help.

Just to use a specific, we've already spoken earlier about the manner in which special messages to the Congress were handled. Normally, unless there was something extraordinary about them, there were a cluster of them decided upon by the President in December, scheduled by Sorensen. Then Sorensen would designate various people to be the shepherd. I one year wound up the shepherd of the foreign aid message. Well, this wasn't my bag particularly, but being the generalist I could work with them. There were some thoughts that were rolling around loose, and I asked Arthur if he would take a look at the draft -- particularly the early part of it -- and see if he couldn't articulate better the thoughts. I don't think I could have. I certainly didn't have the time to, but I

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don't even think that I have the innate capacity to have done it. And I'll swear, within twenty-four hours Arthur had just made it out beautifully. The guy is really, he's gifted, in my view. I think this may be another specific illustration of what I was saying before about the lack of, oh, pomposity or pretensions or concern. I don't think that Arthur, who is obviously a nationally-known personality and a guy who is one of the swingers in the group, would at all be resentful. There wasn't any resentment if a guy like myself asked him to help on something. And by the same token, if he asked me to do something, there was no resentment.

I'm trying to give you a couple more specifics to try to create what I viewed as the atmosphere that existed in the staff at the time. I think that's a pretty good illustration.

As far as O'Donnell was concerned, I think there was some tension between him and Larry O'Brien. O'Brien, I think,

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hewed more to the line that I expressed. If the President of the United States looks you in the eyes and says in that soulful way of his, "I need you," I think that a guy like O'Brien said, "Well, by God, he does, and I'm going to do my best. It's the office, it's not the man. I worked as hard as anybody else to make sure he didn't get to be President, but he is President."

O'Donnell, I think, probably just because there's a difference in personality and background, whatever it is that makes people different -- and Dave Powers [David F. Powers] to some extent was aligned with Kenny on this -- I think the death of the President hit them harder. I think it was a closer personal relationship, perhaps, than the President had with.... But I don't know what the hell it is. But whatever it was, I don't think it's unfair to say that O'Donnell had a much more difficult job in his own mind in making that transition. I never once saw

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him be disrespectful or anything else. I think he was, by nature, sort of a dour fellow anyhow. He's not a warm, gushing guy, so you can't say that he was cold. Hell, that's the way he was.

But let me hasten to add that my relationships with him were absolutely great. There was some suggestion at the time that there was great tension between O'Donnell and Sorensen. I really don't think there was. They were two different human beings with different skills and different contributions to make to the conduct of the presidency by President Kennedy. I remember one specific, it had to do with the Birmingham speech the President made. O'Donnell called me one time about six o'clock at night. He said, "The President just gave Sorensen an impossible job. He's got to write some stuff for TV tonight." And he said, "I don't know how he's going to do it, but would you come on down and help." Well, I was helping anyhow, but the point

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is that he was not trying in any sense to make Sorensen look bad. He was trying to make the President look good, all the time. Anyhow, he did have a tougher time.

Sorensen himself lost -- he was smart enough to know that he would have to lose some of the position that he held under President Kennedy, because his relationship with him was unique. President Johnson operated in a different style. He brought in, as he should have, Walter Jenkins, Jack Valenti, Bill Moyers, Busby [Horace Busby], Reedy [George E. Reedy]. These were guys that he had known and worked with over the years. I know, without having ever been told, that every one of those guys had to have been told by President Johnson, "I

don't want a one of you guys throwing your weight around with those old Kennedy people." And I'm sure --knowing President Johnson as well as I do now -- that there was mixed reasons. One is that he really didn't

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think they should. He has a different attitude about the way staff operate. If anybody was going to screw it up, he was, not they. And secondly, I don't think he wanted to open himself to criticism.

Ralph Dungan had the great big office that Sherman Adams used to occupy. I guess you've heard the story that initially nobody occupied that office because in '61, I think, that beautiful room was kept empty for probably two or three months. Everybody was scared to death that who moved in there would be regarded, you know, by the Kremlinologists and the White House external analyst as the new Sherman Adams. But Ralph snuck into that room after a few months and was there at the time of the assassination.

Walter Jenkins moved into Dick Donahue's [Richard K. Donahue] office up on the second floor. Donahue had already resigned, which is another factor that I don't think has been stressed

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very much. The departure of some of the Kennedy people, I think, was natural, because most of the team had been nearly intact for the full, nearly the three years of the Kennedy presidency, and some people just were leaving. Dick Donahue had already left; Jerry Wiesner [Jerome B. Wiesner] had already submitted his resignation. He didn't leave because the President was assassinated; he left for his own reasons. And I know, for example, that in my thinking, I did not contemplate being there the second four years.

Anyhow, there was an empty office and Walter Jenkins moved into it. And Dungan said to him, "Walter, don't be a goddamn fool. You belong down here." And Walter said, "No, I'll stay up here." And Dungan had to move out on his own and tell the people to put Walter's stuff down in that big room because Walter just didn't want to do it. Walter wanted to ask me to do something because the President had

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told him to or because he wanted to or he wanted to ask me a question, he would walk up from the first floor all the way around back to the corner where I was. I said, "Walter, look," -- I'd known him for a long time -- "just listen, don't be a fool. If you want me, you just have your secretary give me a call. And if I can get away, I'll be down right away. If not I'll let you know, and don't you come up here. Because you've got more to do, and you shouldn't be using your time to walk up here and find out whether I'm busy." Walter, by nature, and I'm sure by instruction, did not want to offend anybody. I think that was characteristic of the whole crowd. I never once caught the message that, you know, the king is dead, long live the

king, and you know we guys are in the saddle now and you fellows ought to kind of help out. So to that extent, I thought that the transition was exceedingly well handled.

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MOSS: How do you react to Johnson's recent interview with Cronkite [Walter Cronkite], in which he stated that he felt there was deliberate undercutting of him by the former Kennedy people?

WHITE: Well, when I watched the telecast, I was not only nodding approval of everything he said, but telling everybody around our house about what a great job he was doing until he got to that clinker. I don't know what part they eliminated at his request, but as far as I'm concerned they eliminated the wrong part. They should have taken that part out. I just don't .... you know, there may be some, but....

Oh, I could tell you another thing. The Attorney General, Bob Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] under Johnson was different from the Attorney General under President Kennedy, for all the obvious reasons -- you know, the great personal shock of the assassination and the awkwardness as he began to get back onto his feet and figure out what life meant and what

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he was supposed to do with it, and so forth. But even again aside from that, it was clear that the relationship with this President had to be totally different. And to some extent where the White House role was less in dealings with the Justice Department under the Kennedy Administration, it became a little more, and my own activities sort of grew a little bit. I was in some fields with the Attorney General and the Justice Department, and I must say, Johnson always was exactly right and proper with Bobby. He never -- in my presence -- let any dirty thoughts or insinuate or implications slide out. And he gave me strict instructions to clear with him on everything and check with him and not leave one damn thing, take one thing for granted. So I must say on the other end of ti, I don't know what Bobby's thoughts were -- I can imagine -- but, in the business sense, everything was awful damn proper, certainly not

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warm, but proper as hell. I didn't see any double-dealing or sneakiness or anything else.

I'm sure President Johnson was talking with other people, seeking advice from guys like Fortas [Abe Fortas] and Clark Clifford and so forth, but that's no crime. That's the nature of the man, and to some extent I think it's not too bad for the President to have somebody from the outside who can give him some objectivity. This week it looks like one of the problems President Nixon has.

MOSS: You talked about how much fun it was and how exciting. Do you have any regrets about it?

WHITE: Now, I'm not sure whether you're talking about or what the question is. On a personal basis or in terms of accomplishments of the Administration?

MOSS: Well, a little bit of both. Accomplishments, I think, mainly, but if there's something were a personal regret illustrates it, fine.

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WHITE: Well, as I indicated, the mind of man is such that the good stuff remains and the bad stuff goes out. There had to be a whole host of situations where a week later I would have done things differently than I did a week before, in terms of my own contribution, my own efforts. I hate to be so damn self-satisfied, but frankly I have a hard time putting my finger on that piece of it, the regret piece. It was a pretty golden period, certainly for me personally. There was just that sense of exhilaration that lifted everything.

There is one little incident that -- I don't think there's any regret in it, but is probably worth recording someplace. That was the day of the assassination. I was having lunch in the White House mess when Jack McNally [John J. McNally] came in -- at 1:40, whatever time it was, and said that the President had been shot. My first instinct was that it was sort of a bizarre sense of humor, because Jack was, you know.... I don't

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think he was capable of anything that bad, but all of a sudden it was evident to me that nobody could have joked at that and his face made it clear.

So I quickly left and went upstairs to Salinger's [Pierre E. G. Salinger] office where the only ticker was located, in the toilet, a couple tickers -- three. Under President Johnson we had tickers scattered all around the building, but under President Kennedy the only tickers were there, and that's where I wanted to go. And I went up there to find out that indeed he was right. The tickers had the story. Helen Gans, a very wonderful, warm hearted woman, was in the office, and I think Nancy Larson, were about the only two. Then, in a matter of just minutes, that room began to fill up with reporters. Now the standard group, of course, were in Texas with the Presidential party. But there was an obvious rush of people to go in.

During that time of the Texas trip, the President's office was being remodeled. New carpet was being put in

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and new drapes were being hung. I don't know what else, maybe painting. But anyhow, it was in sort of a torn up condition. I remember as I walked by that I noted that condition, and looking, as I was, at the ticker and finding myself in the room, and it turned out that there was no other White House staff member present through that very beginning. By default, I became the acting press secretary at the White House, although obviously Mac Kilduff [Malcolm M. Kilduff] who was with the President, was the press secretary. Pierre was on a

plane going to Japan, and -- bless his heart -- Andy Hatcher [Andrew T. Hatcher] was out at the rack track, where he should have been. So for those couple of hours I had the responsibility, self-designated, to kind of work with these people and keep in touch with what was going on with Sorensen. Sorensen and Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] were in the building, were obviously the two most important people that were in the

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building, in touch with Bobby and with O'Donnell in Texas.

Well, I don't remember who asked -- maybe Maggie Hunter [Marjorie Hunter] of the *Times* [New York Times] -- somebody said, "Can we go see the President office?" That was a brand new spot for me, but even if it hadn't been a new spot, the enormity of the moment need not be gone into, I said, "All right," and I started to walk out the door leading out of Pierre's office into the corridor and then down to the President. I thought to myself, "What the hell am I doing that for?" and stopped midstream, turned around and said, "We're not going into the President's office," and pushed them all back into Pierre's office. I'm glad that it worked out that way, because subsequently we had a... You know, nobody's mind would have gone to that, but there was the problem of when the President's dead, there is a new President, and it meant taking all the stuff out of the President's drawers. The girls would

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not do it except with somebody being there, and I was the somebody who was there. And they recorded each envelope to which desk drawer had been emptied. And as I say, just the enormity of that hadn't fully hit us before a period of two or three hours, and by that time others began, from the staff, to come in and sort of spell me. I was the acting major domo there, trying to keep the thing together.

MOSS:           Okay, thank you very much, Mr. White. I've kept you longer than I said I would.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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