

John S. Gleason Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 01/05/1972
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(1915 - 1993). Administrator, U. S. Veterans Administration (1961 - 1965), discusses civil rights issues, building VA hospitals, working with members of Congress, participation in committees, and operation of the administration, among other issues.

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*This interview has two page 41s.

Oral History Interview

Of

John S. Gleason

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John S. Gleason

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Second Oral History Interview

with

John S. Gleason

January 5, 1972
Chicago, Illinois

By Larry J. Hackman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

HACKMAN: One of the things we were talking about at the close of that first interview was the Houston Cemetery and Congressman Thomas [Albert Thomas] and Congressman Thomas dying and all that. I just wanted to ask you whether the White House got at all involved in that? I've seen some memos from you to Elmer Staats [Elmer B. Staats] at BOB [Bureau of the Budget] putting forth the justification for the thing. I just wondered whether anyone at the White House ever got...

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GLEASON: Not to my knowledge. I mean I just don't recollect that they did.

HACKMAN: Yeah, okay.

GLEASON: I'm sure that sometime or other I mentioned it to Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] or to Dick Donahue [Richard K. Donahue].

HACKMAN: Yeah, but there was no big problem from that end?

GLEASON: Oh, no, none at all.

HACKMAN: Okay. One other thing I've heard is that John Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith] came over in the very early days of the administration or, at least, had the idea that to spur the economy, possibly the Veterans Administration could make some early payments on benefits or maybe take some other kinds of actions. Does that ring a bell at all with you? Do you remember him making any efforts in talking with you in that direction?

GLEASON: No. Although I know John, he never mentioned any of this to me. Shortly after I arrived at

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the Veteran's Administration, the President [John F. Kennedy] asked me if I would come over one day. He wanted to know if I'd make some type of study to see if there was any possibility of paying benefits. Oh, a few days later, after having a staff meeting and discussing this, the only thing that I could see that we could do that could spur the economy right then was to pay a dividend to the insurance policy holders of the GI insurance. The President wanted to know how long it would take to do this, and I told him we should be able to make the early payment certainly within three weeks. And this was accomplished. Actually the first payment went out to Jack Kennedy. This was the first so that we could get the publicity for it.

HACKMAN: Sure.

GLEASON: But the first check was made payable to President Kennedy, and I presented it to him at the White House on St. Patrick's Day. It had a border of

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green all the way around it, you know, and "Happy St. Patrick's Day" and so on. It made all of the newspapers throughout the country.

HACKMAN: That's interesting. You didn't ever get any response from the White House that all the publicity on that might not have been favorable because it might have shown veterans benefits going to someone who obviously didn't need it? Did they ever react to that?

GLEASON: No, no, no, because the newspapers knew that we were doing this for publicity sake, so that people would know that they were going out. Although he was the one that received the first check, actually there were over, I think, almost a half a million of them in the mail that same day and so.

HACKMAN: I'm going to kind of be skipping around, you know, filling in what we did that first time. You had talked a little bit last time about differences during

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the administration between yourself and the Budget Bureau on some things. One of the things that came up was this...

GLEASON: The greatest guy in the world was the President to me.

HACKMAN: Yeah, I remember you keeping score and saying the score turned out for you most of the time.

GLEASON: Well, not on most of these, but every time the director of the Bureau of the Budget and I took a matter to the President, it was always resolved in my behalf.

HACKMAN: One of the things that came up was on this vocational rehabilitation thing. There was some extended coverage, a bill passed in '62. Then there's some back and forth between yourself and the White House and BOB and HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare] on whether this could be delegated or contracted or whatever. What do you recall about how your position developed on that and why it developed as it did and how it worked out, or do you remember much?

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GLEASON: Gee, I just....

HACKMAN: You were arguing that for HEW to take over and operate through the federal-state system would be a delegation...

GLEASON: I understand that but I'm just trying to recall and it just doesn't come. They wanted to step in and take it over. Of course, the great benefit with the Veterans Administration handling is that all of its programs dealing with veterans, their widows, and orphans were all within one agency. Of course, the Veterans Administration was an amalgamation or a merging of many, many bureaus. So that all you were going to do, actually, was to break it up, put it out into the states or into HEW. This was the big problem we were in before. It was a matter of policy. I mean right now, without having the benefit of a memorandum and so on that was presented at the time.... It was absolutely against the

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policy of the Veterans Administration because of the problems that we had had in the past.

HACKMAN: Okay. One other thing that came up during that period was Congressman Teague [Olin E. Teague] a couple of times made a proposal in committee [House Committee on Veterans' Affairs]—I don't think it ever got beyond committee—that the Veterans Administration be required to inform his committee before any new construction began. Do you remember at all working with him on that?

GLEASON: Yes.

HACKMAN: How?

GLEASON: In many ways I thought this was a good idea. But, so that it wasn't actually enacted into law, I told Olin that I'd be happy to tell them what we were going to do so that they would know about it. The prior administration had just decided that they were going to build a hospital in 'x' city; and hell, they needed it like they needed four holes in their head. It was more of a political gambit. This is one

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of the things that when I had my first visit with the President, I asked for complete authority to build medical facilities adjacent to existing medical schools.

HACKMAN: Right.

GLEASON: And this he gave me the complete authority in, and so I didn't have to go to Olin for permission from the committee. But I thought it was a very worthwhile idea to let him know what our plans were. He was very favorably disposed and ardent because he too wanted hospitals built where medical school facilities were, because this is where you get the best medical care for the veteran.

We only had one disagreement, and that was when I wanted to build a hospital in Texas. But he said that... I won't name the city right now; there wasn't a medical school there. I had personal assurances from the governor that the state would build a medical school. That Olin didn't

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know and the governor didn't want him to know, for some political reason, I can't think of why. I told him that we were going to build a hospital there and he was quite upset over that, that we were going to do it without a medical school there. And within a year's time the medical school was authorized by the state legislature, so everything turned out well.

HACKMAN: Were there any other Texas political figures involved in that? Was Congressman Thomas involved in that as you were working it out?

GLEASON: No. Well, no, because at that time this was just in the planning stages and, of course, we didn't need the authorization from the Appropriations subcommittee [House Committee on Appropriations] on that. When we finally did go before the subcommittee, we got the authorization from the Congress and by that time Olin was well read into it.

HACKMAN: Yes. No others that you can think of that Teague was upset with?

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GLEASON: Yes. This was Congressman Gonzalez [Henry B. Gonzalez]. He was the one that was pushing for the VA hospital. He talked to the President about it, and he was most anxious to try and do something for Congressman Gonzalez because he was the first Mexican-American congressman. And in talking to the governor of Texas, it all worked out quite well.

HACKMAN: Yes. You might want to talk about Gainesville—there seemed to be a lot of back and forth involving the White House on Gainesville—and exactly what the problem was there and Bay Pines.

GLEASON: Well, Senator Holland [Spessard Lindsey Holland] from Florida, who is one of the senior members of the Senate and an important member on the Senate Appropriations Committee.... Many times, through Senator Holland's efforts, has been authorized an expansion.

HACKMAN: Right.

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GLEASON: When I came in and made an assessment myself—I knew Florida quite well because I used to travel in it on business—it seemed to me to be the poorest place in the world to have it. Here there was a medical school existing over at Gainesville and no veterans hospital. Back in the Truman [Harry S. Truman] administration the Veterans Administration had received approval from the Congress and an authorization to build a hospital there. Then, I think it was in 1950 or '51, when the government had an economic tightening of the belt, President Truman himself knocked out the authorization for Gainesville. Between Dr. Middleton [William S. Middleton], who was my chief medical director and myself, we visited with the president of the University of Florida, the medical school deans. We just thought that this would be the best place in the world to put the hospital. I think because of my close association with Olin Teague, with Albert Thomas and their knowledge of what the Kennedy administration

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was trying to do for the veterans, we were able to get it approved in the House. When it came before the Senate, it was a very difficult position because of Senator Holland. Although Jim Haley [James A. Haley] of Florida who was on the House Veterans Affairs Committee and—I'm trying to think of the congressman's name; he and I served together...

HACKMAN: Democrat or Republican?

GLEASON: ...in the Army. Democrat. We served together in World War II. I'll get it.

HACKMAN: Yeah, okay. Well, I think in one of the...

GLEASON: With Bob Sikes [Robert L. F. Sikes] and Jim Haley and...

HACKMAN: Whatever-his-name-is, right.

GLEASON: And I know it as well as my own, you know. It's terrible to draw a blank like this. We were able to get the state of Florida for backing of our project. The governor was all in favor of it, the state education board was all in favor of it, and so on.

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And Senator Holland sort of had to fold up. In the Senate Appropriations Committee he was quite upset and quite vehement in his insistence that the Bay Pines continue to have the authorization for expansion. I knew at the time that we would not expand the Bay Pines, but I did not oppose his resolution, which was for the sense of the Senate Appropriations Committee at this time. He had it continued. So we were given the authorization for the inspection of the hospital at Gainesville.

Then I wanted to build a new hospital in Miami because the one in Coral Gables was pathetic. I'd say 70 percent of the surgical patients coming back from surgery.... This was a former hotel and the elevators were small; they couldn't get operating room carts into the elevators, they couldn't get them into the bedrooms, and they would have to put the patients on stretchers. And then in putting them into the elevator, you'd have to tilt them up, you know. Well, gee, in many operations this causes quite a strain, on the stretcher, to the particular place where

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you've been operated—if it's in the stomach, back, anywhere. Then you'd have to transfer them again in order to get them into the room. It was a very poor situation. And once again Holland was objecting to this, instead of going ahead with the Bay Pines. We finally got that through. Charlie Bennett [Charles E. Bennett].

HACKMAN: Yeah.

GLEASON: Charlie and I got the Silver Star at the same time in the war.

HACKMAN: What about...

GLEASON: Well, we got the Coral Gables thing straightened out so it's the new Miami Hospital.

Then, when I went to the Senate for authority to build a hospital in Tampa, this is when Holland hit the roof. Gee, he was holding up support for the President's program. I was burning my hand in the fire, because I had been given confidential information by the governor that he would build a hospital there. Now Holland had been governor of the state, he had been chairman of the

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education board himself, and he knew nothing at all about his. And I kept insisting. At one meeting before the Senate Appropriations Committee, he stood up and he asked me what it would take to force me to put the extension on Bay Pines. I told him that it would take an act of the Congress of the United States, signed by the President of the United States—which I knew that he wouldn't receive.

HACKMAN: Sure.

GLEASON: The President would veto it because it was not the place to build it. And with that, the chairman, his face turned ashen. With that Holland jumped up and with white hair, with hands up in the air, he screamed out, "My God, bureaucracy gone mad." Afterwards he did apologize to me; he said that he was sorry. I told him that, "Senator, you have always been very nice to me, but I had received this information in confidence and I couldn't divulge it," because I had

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always gotten along well with him except for Bay Pines.

HACKMAN: Yeah. How would information like that come to you? Now it's happened really in two cases, Texas and Florida, that you've talked about. Would this be just a local...

GLEASON: Well, it came to me through the Veterans Administration, through the regional offices; and it would come indirectly, of course, through the dean of the medical school or the man, rather, who was going to become the dean of the medical school.

HACKMAN: Sure.

GLEASON: And then with the help of Bob Sikes and Charlie Bennett... Charlie was a great supporter of mine because of our previous association and Charlie had a disability himself. So when I would have to get to the governor in a confidential manner, one of either Charlie Bennett, Jim or Bob would be able to arrange it: and they could do it on a confidential basis.

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HACKMAN: Yeah. Now, on something like this, where Senator Holland is creating some problems maybe for other administration programs, what sort of feed-in or response would you get from Larry O'Brien or from the President himself on something like that?

GLEASON: Well, little if any. I mean when Holland would act this way and if he would say to Wilson [Henry Hall Wilson]—who was up on the congressional Hill—that he was having problems with the Veterans Administration, then Larry would ask me what it was all about. I'd tell him just exactly what it was, and how we'd been having problems with Holland, but that everything was going to be fine. I never had a problem with anybody in the White House at any time. As far as I was concerned, it was the smoothest operating organization.

HACKMAN: Now, there's a long drawn out thing on this Gainesville power situation. Do you recall that? Maybe you could just... Is this mostly technical, or what are the political forces that are operating on that?

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GLEASON: Well, as I recall, this was between Florida Power and Light [Florida Power and Light Company] and the city of Gainesville. Right now I can't tell you without referring to memoranda whether it was Florida Light and Power or whether it was the city of Gainesville where we had a six foot strip of land connecting to their right-of-way or whatever you might call it. This did give us problems at the time because we did have the access that had never been closed and this six foot strip. It was just sort of something fortuitous. When you really came down to it, there was nothing legal that anybody could complain about. It did subside. This was something that we discovered when we were sort of really thrown right into it, that we did have that opening there; we weren't surrounded completely. We did wind up with getting the power, oh, almost a third cheaper than we wd have had to pay otherwise.

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HACKMAN: Okay. One of the other things that created a little stir was this matter when you relocated the seven area medical directors into Washington and, oh, Dr. Magnuson [Paul Budd Magnuson], and I think a Dr. Boone [Joel

Thompson Boone], who had formerly been chief medical officers, got a little exercised over that.

GLEASON: Well, Paul Magnuson was a great doctor and so was Joel Boone. Of course, Joel had a great deal of influence being the only medical man in Navy history to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor and so on. Paul Magnuson had a great reputation. He once performed an operation here on one of the Armour children—and it was, I believe, an appendectomy, a rather simple operation—and charged a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. I was paid for and one Mr. Armour—which Mr. Armour, I am not in a position to say; I just don't know—asked him about why the large fee. He said, “Well, it was worth it. You wanted my services and I gave you those services and I expect to be paid,”

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which he was. Paul said that he would charge people that could afford it that much, because there was so much that he did in charity for nothing, for people at the county hospital and so on that he thought it was a fair way of distributing. But he was quite a guy—always drove around in a Rolls Royce. He was a, you know, well-to-do individual. I knew Paul from back there in Chicago. He used to rant and rave, but I never would pay much attention. You know, I don't mean that I wouldn't pay attention, but it just never bothered me at all because once he got out of the room.... And oh, he'd go around to different members of the Congress and so on and so forth, but these people that he would go to—Olin Teague and Thomas and the Senate Committee—they knew what the hell I was trying to do. They'd sort of....

HACKMAN: Yeah. Where was Dr. Middleton on this question?

GLEASON: Well, Dr. Middleton was not favorably disposed towards it. When I went into the Veterans Administration

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it didn't take too long to find out that doctors are a very difficult group to try and control. I think in government, as in business, it's almost impossible to carry on the function of an administrator without having a strong control over the employees; and we had five thousand doctors. We were constantly fighting the American Medical Association, because this was government subsidized medicine and they were opposed to it. And doctors within our own Veterans Administration were opposed to this because I insisted that no doctor on the Veterans Administration could practice medicine privately. This was something that they didn't like because they could make extra money moonlighting. I didn't think this was fair to the private practitioner.

So I was in a little bit of trouble with the doctors of the VA medicine [Department of Medicine and Surgery], and it was sort of funneled up through the directors of the area. I could send out directives—

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although I never sent a directive unless it was an administrative matter directly to an area medical director.... I would send them down through Dr. Middleton, which was the proper channel of control, but they knew where it was coming from, and they would sort of gloss over it. This I didn't like. So I determined that the only way that I was going to be able to shake these people up was to bring them into Washington. And if they didn't want to come to Washington, the hell with them; they could go somewhere else. But I was determined that we were going to have control. It was going to be under one guy and if it wasn't going to be the administrator then they could get somebody else or we'd get new medical directors.

HACKMAN: Yeah.

GLEASON: And I had an exceptionally fine medical advisory committee—I think the outstanding medical men of the country. This was not through my doing.

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This was through the advice and counsel of Dr. Middleton, whom I admire greatly. I think Bill is one of the finest men I've ever been associated with. He knew that I was studying this—having a study made—and he asked me, as one gentleman to another, that before I would come to a decision if I would give him the opportunity of knowing it first and preparing an opportunity to discuss it.

Oh, but the area medical directors were really impeding what I thought was necessary administration. A number of them, three of them, were sending letters out to their colleagues with unpleasant, even denunciatory statements about me as an administrator, which I thought was very disloyal. They were actually trying to drum up a little bit of a.... Well, I better change...

HACKMAN: You can change this as you go through if there's anything you want to...

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GLEASON: Oh, all right, okay. When I received the evidence of this from other people within the Veterans Administration who knew that I had nothing personal, I was just trying to get things under control.... They actually gave me the evidence of the doctors' letters and so on. That inflamed me so much that on the day that we were having our monthly medical advisory committee meeting.... It was about 7 o'clock the night before that I finally got all of this evidence in and the investigators showing me what they had and discussed it. And that evening I had been mulling it over in my mind and came down in the morning determined that I'd had it.

So at about 8:15 I had Bill come up to the office and sat down and talked to him and told him what I was going to do. He seemed rather shocked really; but when I presented him the evidence, with the signed signatures of these men and what they were saying in their letters, I think this really shook him. He didn't know, you know,

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whether to say yes or no. Although he had feelings that he wanted to keep the area medical directors where they were, yet with this presentation of evidence it was difficult for him to say anything at the time.

So I left him or he left me and went back to the meeting, and five minutes later I walked into the medical advisory meeting and announced what I was doing. I said because of reasons that I didn't wish to make public I didn't think that the area medical directors were loyal employees. The only way that I could see to have a good administration was to bring them into Washington and have them work directly under the chief medical director. Because then if I issued a directive to him, I knew that he himself would be talking to them and they would receive it. And then if they didn't follow the direction, I had grounds for removal.

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HACKMAN: Yeah, right. How did that work out then?

GLEASON: It worked out fine. I don't say that this was the best thing to do. Under the circumstances I think it was the only thing that could be done.

HACKMAN: Yeah.

GLEASON: I'm sure that if you had really loyal, capable people in that particular position, I don't think it would have been necessary to bring them in.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Did any of these people leave or...

GLEASON: Yes, well, they didn't actually leave the Veterans Administration, but a number of them did take positions as directors of hospitals. They didn't want to move into Washington. I can understand that, their families and so on were already located. Many of them didn't want to do that. One notably, in Salt Lake City, who was a real bastard, holed up. He was the ringleader. I had no objection; he

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was a very capable doctor. I had no objection to him being a hospital director, but I made certain from then on.... Oh, three or four times a year I'd throw an investigator in there just to check up, and he knew it. I knew what I was doing too, because if I had found that he wasn't conducting himself or comporting himself as a good hospital director, he knew that he was out. I was ready to tie the can to him just as fast as I could, but he was an excellent doctor.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Can you remember at that time having to make any special efforts with the press to keep from getting a bad press on this question?

GLEASON: Well, I didn't have to. I had a very capable, I think probably the most able.... We didn't have public relations in the Veterans Administration, it was under a different title; but Frank Hood [Frank R. Hood] was the director. Frank, I think, was the

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most diplomatic individual in a position of that type. He could get more out of the press than a hundred other people. He had a very soft sell manner. I thought Frank was probably one of the most important men in the whole Veterans Administration. I would have liked to have had a position such as deputy administrator to put Frank into because he did such a...

HACKMAN: He was in a special assistant slot as I remember, or something like that.

GLEASON: Well, we can look that up. I can recall though that I had one hell of a time trying to get the Civil Service [Civil Service Commission] permission to approve Frank for a grade 17 [GS-17]. I really wanted him to grade 18; they had him at a grade 16 and they turned him down. Through John Macy [John W. Macy, Jr.], I was able to get the Commission to actually come over and see what he did and how he did it. All of the members

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of the Commission came over, and I was able to visit with them and actually demonstrate what Frank was doing and see right there, before they even left the office, really....

HACKMAN: Yeah. Were there any other problems that you had with the Civil Service Commission at that level or just general problems below that level?

GLEASON: No. I had the greatest working arrangement with the Civil Service Commission. I'm sure others had the same, but mine was very close.

HACKMAN: Yeah. What about contacts coming from the Hill or from the White House for placing people in Veterans Administration, how were those handled? Can you recall any particular problems on those?

GLEASON: The greatest problem I had was when I went into office. The only really big problem was with Senator Stennis [John C. Stennis] who was a very powerful individual. Senator Stennis had asked

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the White House to have me appoint—because the President couldn't appoint anybody in the Veterans Administration except me, because under the law I was the only one who could be appointed....

HACKMAN: Right.

GLEASON: But he wanted the White House to advise me to appoint as my general counsel a man who had been the attorney general for the state of Mississippi and had been defeated as lieutenant governor. Larry talked to me about this and then I did some researching. I found out that—what was that man's name?—they had a murder in Mississippi of a young boy who was, I don't know, only about eleven or twelve years of age. They finally found his body. It had been through the Ku Klux Klan and so on, because this little guy, eleven years of age, a girl was passing by and he started to whistle. But he wasn't whistling at her from what his family

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had to say and so on, but he happened to be whistling. Some people misunderstood it and said that he was whistling at her and she was fifteen and here he was only ten or eleven years of age if he was a day, I think maybe he was even younger.

HACKMAN: Yeah.

GLEASON: And so, at least it seems as though they took it out on him and did away with him. I had many friends throughout the country because I had been national commander of the American Legion, so I knew people in every little hamlet and town and city in the entire United States. There wasn't a town that you could mention in the country that I couldn't pick up the telephone and call...

HACKMAN: Someone.

GLEASON: ...Joe Doaks and say, you know, "What's the history?" This was a great asset. So I contacted my friends in Mississippi about this particular

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individual, and they sent me copies of newspaper headlines where the headlines actually, when he was running for lieutenant governor, said, "If elected I will hang every Negro from the nearest tree," you know. Well, that's a pretty broad statement, and he was very antagonistic towards the civil liberties of black people, minorities. And this was so overwhelming as it came in to me. Here, I came from Chicago; we have one of the largest Negro populations in the United States. Many of my friends in Chicago are Negro, and I just couldn't see myself putting into my administration someone who was so bitterly opposed because, if anything, I wanted to increase the number of Negro employees in the VA, which we did.

So I told Larry that I just wasn't going to be able to do it. He asked me if I would talk to Senator Stennis, which I did. The Senator was very gentlemanly as a Southerner would be, but when I left the

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office I knew that I did not have a friend, that it would be a very difficult time if I ever needed his assistance or help in any manner. And not directly, but indirectly, he opposed many of the things that we were trying to do.

In Mississippi, when we built the hospital in Jackson, he indirectly tried to keep Negro employees from being hired. He wanted to try and keep it an all-white hospital which, in an indirect way, I tried to use as a symbol. In the floor pattern as you walk into the hospital, there are black and white squares. They wanted everything white. This may seem like a silly thing to do, but I said, "I want people to know that there's black and white in this hospital and I want them to get the impression just as soon as they walk in the door."

HACKMAN: Yeah.

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GLEASON: And I forget the governor's name right now, of Mississippi, but at the Jackson...

HACKMAN: Ross Barnett [Ross R. Barnett]?

GLEASON: Barnett, right. At the dedication of the hospital, Ross Barnett told me that that was the first time in his life that he had ever sat in a mixed group of white and black—because we were having it on federal property. And he told me that was the first time in his life that he had ever sat in a mixed group of white and black. And Torby Macdonald [Torbert H. Macdonald], a congressman from Massachusetts who was a friend that I got to know well, and I had gone down there, and he gave one of the talks at the dedication for me. He was quite surprised, you know, at this remark.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Well, other than that from Stennis, can you think of other requests that were similar to that one?

GLEASON: No.

HACKMAN: Or ones coming from the White House, let's say, for instance

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Ed O'Brien [Edmund C. O'Brien] in Boston? I don't know if you remember that. He was the assistant manager in the Boston office, but I think the White House made an effort on his behalf. I don't know if you remember that one.

GLEASON: It wasn't O'Brien.

HACKMAN: I have a guy named Ed O'Brien, assistant manager in the Boston Veterans Administration office. He's still there.

GLEASON: Well, that doesn't ring a bell with me at all.

HACKMAN: Yeah, okay.

GLEASON: Who was the regional manager?

HACKMAN: I don't know that.

GLEASON: Well, that was one that worked closely with Jack and Larry in the campaign—an Irish name but it's not O'Brien.

HACKMAN: I've forgotten that.

GLEASON: But Larry asked me.... He had been with the Veterans

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Administration, and that's why I thought...

HACKMAN: Connors [William F. Connors]?

GLEASON: Connors, Bill Connors. That's the only request that I can recall direct like that from the White House. Larry said, you know, "We'd sure like to have Bill Connors as a regional manager." Well, I didn't say, "Yes, we would," because I always felt, you know, if they didn't like the way that I was running the Veterans Administration, all they had to do was to say so and hell, I could come back to making four times as much money as I was making there.

HACKMAN: Sure.

GLEASON: So I didn't give a damn, you know, really in that sense. And when I came back I asked Ed Kelly [Edward T. Kelly] and Abe Lincoln [Harold W. Lincoln] to check it and let me know what his background was. Gee, everyone came up and said, "This guy's an okay guy. You can work with him," and so on. So this was all I wanted to know. So I made Bill the regional manager, and he did an excellent job,

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a fine job, real good.

HACKMAN: Okay. Were people sending over names constantly from the Democratic National Committee? Or there was a lady named Dorothy Davies who was working in sort of second-level people at the White House, did you ever...

GLEASON: No.

HACKMAN: Okay.

GLEASON: I mean they may have sent names over but it never came to my attention, you know, that....

HACKMAN: Any big problems with other people who you inherited from the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] administration or appointments that you made on your own that had to be changed during the administration for whatever reasons that you recall?

GLEASON: Well, there were a number of people when I first went into the VA that had been appointed over there. They had positions at the White House.

HACKMAN: You had talked about that in the first one so I'll save you time from repeating that.

GLEASON: Okay. Thank you. Well, not at the moment I can't recall any.

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HACKMAN: I've got a list of—you may have a little trouble figuring this out—just some of the upper-level people in the VA, and I just have indicated if changes were made during the administration. There aren't really very many that changed from '61 to '63.

GLEASON: Cy Brickfield [Cyril Brickfield] was one that we appointed as general counsel. Cy had been recommended to me by Larry O'Brien. Once again, no commitment, but in checking his background and talking to him, this was an ideal guy. He had been the general counsel for the House Judiciary Committee; he certainly had a very good background in government that way. In checking him out in New York with my friends, my spies and secret agents, he was top drawer. They thought he was....

HACKMAN: Yeah. Okay.

GLEASON: You want any discussion on any of these?

HACKMAN: Not unless anything comes to mind that really stands out in your mind. I don't know the background

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on most of those people or where they came in from.

GLEASON: Well, Phil Budd [Philip J. Budd] I inherited from a previous administration. He had been the special assistant to the previous administrator, and, as such, had been stamped, you know, Republican all over. There were two or three instances of the White House, and I can't recall who in the White House, making a suggestion about getting rid of Phil. But this was a tremendous individual that could really do the job, and I didn't give a damn whether he voted straight Republican or not.

HACKMAN: Yeah.

GLEASON: I mean the job that he was in in the Veterans administration, no one else in my judgment could do it half as good. As a result, we just never did a damn thing and I told him so.

HACKMAN: Yeah.

GLEASON: He was always very good. Leon Wallace was appointed as confidential

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assistant. Leon was a Negro, very light complexioned, and a very valuable asset. He could give a speech exceptionally well; he had been in the insurance field in Detroit just before he came to Washington. I think Leon may have been suggested from the White House. He did a great job for us. That's the only other one.

HACKMAN: Okay. One of the things...

GLEASON: We had great problems with Dr. McNinch [Joseph H. McNinch] though. I never had problems with him. Within the Veterans Administration, Dr. McNinch succeeded Dr. Middleton. We had great difficulty getting a successor for Dr. Middleton. I wanted to have Dr. Mayo [Charles W. Mayo] because of his sort of national acceptance—the son of one of the founders of the Mayo Clinic and so on. I asked the President one day when I was over there if he would write Dr. Mayo and ask Chuck if he'd take the position, because he was then just retiring from the Clinic. So the President called Evelyn Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln] in and he turned to me and he said, "You dictate the

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letter and I'll sign it," which we did. And Chuck called me on the phone when he got the.... I mean, you know, getting the letter directly from the President is a hell of a lot different, you know. I knew Chuck fairly well, and he called me and he said, gee, he'd sure like to do it but because of family matters, he just couldn't see his way clear.

And then I talked to Dr. Berry [George P. Berry] of Harvard University, George Berry. Well, he gave it serious consideration for almost a month, because we started out early enough—of course, I was working with Dr. Middleton on it—but they were having an expansion program up there and I guess some of the trustees and so on prevailed on him to remain closely associated with it. I would have loved to have had him; he would have brought a lot of stature to the Veterans Administration.

And then Dr. McNinch was just retiring as the surgeon general of the United States Army. I didn't know him from a hole in the ground. Dr. Middleton and the medical advisory committee said that

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they thought that he would be an outstanding individual, and as an individual he was. It was very difficult for him though to put himself into government in a quasi-political situation. In the army when he issued a directive as the surgeon general, this was God talking, you know, and, boy, no one deviated from it. Well, he would go up, and he really pulled boner after boner before Albert Thomas in the House as well as in the Senate. They would ask him, "Well, why?" And he'd say, "Because I said so." And boy, this doesn't mean a damn thing, you know. You have to be able to substantiate it with facts.

Gee, at one hearing when he was testifying—we were all there—Albert Thomas just closed up the book, and he said, "This meeting is adjourned and we're not holding it any more, period. You're dismissed." I thought, God.... That night I guess McNinch, you know, realized that either he was in over his head there.... So the next morning, at about 8:15, he called

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Albert Thomas and asked for an appointment, went up, and personally apologized. From there on, you know, he was on his way out. You have to cooperate. These guys really aren't so damn difficult to get along with if you can just give them some facts to substantiate what you're trying to do. And they'll even take it on faith, you know, if you can just give them something and talk to them, discuss the problems; but he wouldn't. I mean for myself, he was great, you know. If I asked him now as an area medical director, I couldn't have had anyone in there that would have done a better job, so far as I was concerned, because when I gave instructions to Dr. McNinch he made damn sure that these guys stayed in line. So you can't have everything. Gee, of course, right after that he resigned.

HACKMAN: You also developed the idea and then put into practice the Department of Data Management, I believe, in VA.

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GLEASON: Yes. That's the one I put Phil Budd in, the man I told you was so outstanding.

HACKMAN: Yeah, right. Was there much resistance to that from within the organization or from elsewhere that you remember?

GLEASON: No. I mean there was.... You were always having congressional inquiries on it. Before I went to Washington, I had studied the computer operations of the First National Bank [First National Bank of Chicago] as well as others. I mean it's the only way you could go. This was the coming thing.

HACKMAN: Yeah, okay. Maybe we could talk about legislation a little bit—starting off with National Service Life Insurance in '61 when the administration basically was not favorable to the idea and in '62, I believe, when the administration went along with the idea. What accounted for the first stand and then some amount of change on it?

GLEASON: Well, I think really it was a change in the President's thinking about the Veterans Administration. I really don't think he knew anymore

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than I did. I had been national commander of the American Legion, and I thought I knew a great deal about veterans programs from that. I think the President was opposed—I don't say openly, but certainly guardedly opposed—to this, the reopening. In a year's time he learned a great deal about the Veterans Administration that he didn't know before, as I did.

I didn't realize when I went into this position, that next to the Department of Defense it's the largest department or agency in the federal government. You know, I didn't really focus on this before, until I was in the job six or eight months and found out. The VA is larger than eight of the other ten Cabinet positions put together. And, God, you know, the magnitude of it; suddenly you begin to focus on it. So, if you pass this along to those who are over at the White House and so on.... And I think the President finally saw that this wasn't such a

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bad thing, because he was under the impression—as so many people were—that, you know, the United States government was really paying the cost of all this. Hell, as with the GI bill, my God, the government wound up not paying a damn thing once that hurdle was passed....

HACKMAN: Yeah, you don't remember trying to build support for other administration programs on the Hill, particularly with Senator Long [Russell B. Long]? Was it really an important factor on this shift?

GLEASON: Well, Senator Long was always an important factor. But when it came to people like Senator Long.... Even though when I had the problems that I did with Senator Stennis, I had a great friend in Dick Russell [Richard B. Russell, Jr.]. Back in 1952, at the Democratic National Convention, I was the manager of Dick Russell's campaign for the nomination for president.

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HACKMAN: I didn't know that.

GLEASON: Well, not many people did, you know, or remember it. I was treasurer of the Democratic Convention here in Chicago at the time, and Dick had asked me if I'd—now I'm sure that at the time Dick was very anxious for me to.... Jack Arvey [Jacob M. Arvey], who was chairman of the party here in Illinois at the time, was one of my closest friends; we'd served together overseas, you know, all of us. And I'm sure that there's this in the background in Dick's wanting me here in Chicago.

But at the same time I had a close rapport with Dick. And when I would really think that I might need help from the Southern conservative group—of which he was the acknowledged leader—I could go up and talk to Dick in a very confidential manner, as I finally wound up doing with Lister Hill, too. And then Dick in his own

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inimitable way would take care of it, so that I really didn't run into the flak that might have occurred.

HACKMAN: Can you remember, in '61, making efforts with veterans groups to give up pushing for the National Service Life Insurance reopener in order to make it possible for the compensation increase which took place, I believe in '61, to pass?

GLEASON: Well, this we did in sort of a roundabout way because I knew damn well that that particular year we weren't going to get the reopening of the National Service. You know, after you get the pulse of the committees in the Congress as well as the pulse from the White House, there's no sense in going down with the ship if you can live to another day and win the battle. And the American Legion gave me hell, you know; their past national commander, you know, had given up.

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HACKMAN: Yeah, yeah.

GLEASON: You know we lived to win the battle the following year. I think there's a time and a place to stand and fight. We don't have a retreat, we just have a retrograde movement.

HACKMAN: Yeah. World War I pensions, of course, is something that kept coming up. Can you remember any problems at all in having a clear administration policy on that between yourself and the White House?

GLEASON: No. I personally was opposed to pensions. I didn't have too much problem with the White House because if I was opposed to it, you know, they weren't for it. So that it wasn't too damn difficult to get support at the White House because they weren't for it; I don't say that they were against it, but they definitely weren't for it. And as long as I was opposed to it, at least they had their acquiescence and it was just something that.... There's always a time for pensions

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for those who need the money and help. That's why we have the pension program in operation at VA. I mean, if a guy is really destitute, my God, you're going to have to give it to him one way, either through federal charities or federal pensions, state or local.

HACKMAN: Yeah. How much work did that take for you on the Hill to keep that from passing, particularly when Denton [Winfield K. Denton] was trying to get his discharge petition going?

GLEASON: Well, that at one point came right down to the wire, you know. I think they lost by...

HACKMAN: Yeah, ten or something.

GLEASON: Yeah, less than ten I think it was. At that particular point in time we really had to expend a hell of a lot of effort, I mean, in calling those who didn't sign for it. And then it actually would have carried but there were seven congressmen who we got to remove their names from it.

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HACKMAN: Yeah. Now on something like that, would this be primarily yourself and your assistants or would O'Brien and Wilson and these people really be cooperating closely with you?

GLEASON: Larry always cooperated with me. Henry, Dick, they all cooperated. You know, they cooperated 100 percent. In the four years that I was there, I never had really a lack of cooperation from the White House at any time.

HACKMAN: Yeah, but is this a level of thing that they would really gear up on and get themselves on the Hill on, or would they leave contacts primarily to you and your people?

GLEASON: Well, when it came to something like this, Henry Wilson was working his tail off with us and there were certain things.... I know of seven congressmen that removed their names from the discharge petition because they were interested in having certain things done by the Veterans Administration in their own congressional

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district. You know, sometimes you can go up and say, "Look, on that, gee, I want to help you, I want to do this for you. But, gee, they can't do it when you're beating me to death." Some people might call it a deal, but I don't look at it as a deal because we would have done this anyway for them. But it made it a heck of a lot easier for me to do it within a reasonable period of time than if they didn't, because, you know, Larry and the rest of the guys, they're hard soldiers when it comes down to the political wars.

HACKMAN: Yeah. You never felt they put you in the hole, though, by over committing on things?

GLEASON: Gee, I don't just say this to you now but I would have said it to you then and I would say it to you twenty years from now.

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

GLEASON: The White House was just tremendous, to be quite honest, at all times.

HACKMAN: In '62 when those compensation increases—I guess they were passed in '62....

GLEASON: Yeah.

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HACKMAN: And they were for more than the administration wanted—I believe ninety-eight million as opposed to sixty-four which the administration had desired. Can you remember what your efforts were to hold this down and who you had to work with?

GLEASON: No, we made no efforts to hold it down, because the administration.... No, I didn't go out of my way, you know, to oppose the administration in holding it down, but I did nothing at all as far as the Veterans Administration was concerned to hold it down. Now, when we went before the committees, I followed the line that the President wanted or the White House wanted. And, no, when Olin Teague talked to me about it, he said that he wanted to have it larger. I said, "Well, this is up to the discretion of the Congress," because he knew damn well that I wanted to have it higher. I'd worked my tail off when I was national commander to have it

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higher and, you know, it was a matter of principle. But yet I wanted them to know what the administration's view was.

HACKMAN: Yeah.

GLEASON: I did nothing from the Veterans Administration to pull them up.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Now one of things I believe that was holding this up in the Senate is that the Senate wanted the House in '62 to approve the National Service Life Insurance because the Senate had already passed that. Do you remember getting involved in that and whether there was any.... What did you try to do there?

GLEASON: Yup, I sure do. Well, at that time they didn't have a Senate Veterans' Committee [Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee] but they had.... What was the senator's name from Texas?

HACKMAN: Yarborough [Ralph W. Yarborough]?

GLEASON: Yarborough, Ralph. Ralph Yarborough and Olin Teague were bitter enemies and they both came

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from the same state. And I mean they were really bitter enemies. Olin Teague had always been with the Veterans' Committee; and being the only major committee for veterans in the Congress at that time, there were certain rights and privileges which he thought were his. And anything that was done in Texas as far as veterans were concerned, he wanted it to emanate from him. And Ralph Yarborough was fighting constantly to have a committee, of which he then would be the chairman, and then he would be as powerful as Teague, you see.

HACKMAN: Right.

GLEASON: And Teague didn't want him as powerful as he was, you know. It's just a clash of two people from the same state that wanted to lay claim to everything that they could. So this was just a battle between the giants, and we were sort of caught in the middle. I was trying to placate Ralph and Olin. They

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wouldn't talk to one another, and I'd go from one back to the other. But this was sort of a day's work, you know.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Can you remember what finally broke that in '62 so that it was ironed out and the compensation increase was legislated?

GLEASON: Well, Olin said that he absolutely would not do it, you know. And I don't know, I think that Albert Thomas.... I used to go to Albert, you know, because he was from Texas also. So this was why, if Albert would want something that I could possibly deliver for him, jeez, I'd break my ass for him. He was a great guy, to me he was.

And as I recollect, Albert went and talked to Ralph. I assured him that later on he would use it, because Albert used to play paddle ball every day with Olin—every day they'd play paddle ball. They were very close. And he gave assurance of it to Ralph the following year; I forget what it was that Ralph

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had a particular yen for, but he would use all of his influence to see that it came about. And this is the thing that it depended on.

HACKMAN: Something else I don't have much background on, but the War Orphans Assistance Extension, you supported that, I believe, at least by the fall of '63. Do you remember how you came around to that position at all?

GLEASON: No, at the moment I can't. This is something that the American Legion had been in favor of. The Veterans of Foreign Wars. They'd all been favorably disposed towards it before I came to the Administration, and something which most people thought should be done. It was really nothing of any major project, no great battle against it.

HACKMAN: Yeah. There was a nursing care bill in '63 which eventually passed in '64. I know the Bureau of the Budget was opposed, I believe, to quite a bit of it. Is this something again that had to go

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to the White House to be resolved?

GLEASON: Yes, it went to the President and he resolved it.

HACKMAN: Yea. Do you remember your arguments, or...

GLEASON: I could trace them blow-by-blow if you want to take that long. The Bureau of the Budget was under the impression that this would cost billions of dollars and would require a step-up in employment in VA and so on. And although it was going to cost an additional sum of money, it wasn't going to amount to the magnitudes that they were talking.

Before it became an administration policy, I was laying the groundwork both in the Senate and the House for this, and I had strong support for it. They knew that I was for it. They knew that, at least to that point, the administration was unalterably opposed to it. The Bureau of the Budget was unalterably

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opposed to it and when it finally came down to the line, the director of the Bureau said that they just couldn't do it. And that's when I asked if we could take the matter to the President, because in principle and in conscience, I just couldn't see these poor bastards laying around. God, it was just pathetic, the study had all proved that.

We went in to see the President—all the times I went before him, he always gave me the opportunity of speaking last, and of course this was the best. When the director got through, why, he turned to me—I was sitting on one couch, near the hearth, the director was on the other couch, the President in his rocking chair was to my right—he said, “Jack, what have you got to say?” When I got through, he rocked for five or six rocks, I guess, and he looked up, and he said, “Well, I think we ought to go along with Jack's suggestion.”

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I mean that was it.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Other than always speaking last, what in your own mind did you find in these kinds of meetings were convincing arguments with the President? What sort of strategy or approach would you usually try to take?

GLEASON: Well, I always had all of the facts, just solid, and I knew them cold. Now, when I knew that we were going to go before the President, if there was some little phase that I didn't understand myself, God, I'd have my staff in there and they'd brief me for days, you know, really going over the program even though there was some particular phase of the program that I knew, you know, as well as they did, gee, they still went over it again. So that by the time that I got to the President.... An effort,

you know. There was much about the Veterans Administration that I never knew really, and there's no way you can. But on those particular

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things, my God, I knew this stuff so cold that if he brought up a question, which he did on occasion, I mean I could come through with the exact answer that the Bureau of the Budget couldn't refute, you see. And when you really have all the facts, you've got your soldiers lined up and, God, it's hard to shoot them down.

HACKMAN: Yeah, well, did it seem that the BOB people were usually ill-prepared because this was way down on...

GLEASON: No, well, I won't say that they were ill-prepared but I think on many of these instances they were ill-advised. I don't say that the director was opposed, but there were certain people on his staff that were opposed to veterans programs in total. I don't care what you say, if you could find a disabled veteran, a paraplegic without any legs, they were opposed to giving him so much as ten cents for a cup of coffee, you know.

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HACKMAN: Yeah. Would this be on down the line or would this be like Sam Hughes [Phillip S. Hughes] and at this level?

GLEASON: Not Sam. Sam was a real fine guy. At times he had to take a position, but Sam was one of the nicest guys to deal with. I won't say who wasn't but if you ask me any particular names I'll tell you. But Sam was a real fine gentleman to work with.

HACKMAN: I've forgotten a lot of the names over there. Elmer Staats I guess was there.

GLEASON: Oh, yeah, Elmer was a fine guy.

HACKMAN: Well, Turner [Robert C. Turner] was an economist.

GLEASON: Yeah.

HACKMAN: I can't go down the line, I've forgotten who they are.

GLEASON: Turner wasn't too bad a guy, but there were people there that, oh, were so antagonistic to the Veterans Administration itself, you know.

HACKMAN: Were there times when on legislation not directly related to veterans that O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] or the White

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House asked for you to do work on the Hill? Can you remember instances of that?

GLEASON: Sure. Well, I mean right offhand I can't, but on a number of occasions.... You know, we had the second largest budget in the government, so when Larry would run into problems in certain areas, he'd call me and he'd say, "Gosh, these are the guys that we can't get committed. Have you gotten any contact with them?" as he did with all of the departments and agencies. And with many of them, we might be considering building a hospital in a particular area, you know. Well, whether you plan the project to begin this year or next year might make a hell of a big difference to this particular congressman because he's running for re-election either this year or next. You always had that benefit when you were dealing with the House because they either had to run for re-election this year or next year

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and, boy, you could time those things pretty damn well to coincide with that date.

HACKMAN: Can you remember the pieces of legislation that they really seemed to be geared up on in terms of involving everyone around the administration? I'm thinking of the Rules [Rules Committee] fight in '61...

GLEASON: The Rules fight was one of them. I think it was Sid Herlong [Albert Sydney Herlong, Jr.], who comes from Florida. The Rules fight was around the time of Gainesville, and this was his home base. He knew we wanted it, he needed it and so on. Sid was a hell of a good friend of mine—and Sid was the guy that later on sponsored me for membership in Burning Tree [Burning Tree Club]. But anyway, on this particular piece of legislation, the Rules, my God, they just excoriated me for putting the heat on, you know.

HACKMAN: Publicly, you mean?

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GLEASON: Oh, not publicly; this was privately, over the telephone. Oh jeez, he just ate my ass off, you know. I said, "Well, Sid, you know we all have to live." You know, you take it but.... We delivered pretty well for.... Larry wouldn't ask you to call, you know, like twelve guys. I suppose from Larry's viewpoint you tell them well what you have that might be of keen interest. And Larry would make the decision whether it would be Agriculture [Department of Agriculture] or Commerce

[Department of Commerce] or VA or somebody else to call. I think we had seven of them, I think seven or eight of them.

HACKMAN: On the Rules fight argument.

GLEASON: Yeah.

HACKMAN: What about, oh, civil rights bill of '63. Do you remember calling anyone on that?

GLEASON: Well, right now offhand I couldn't tell you. In the files, you know, there's everything there.

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HACKMAN: I have a list of a meeting that you attended in '61 with Weaver [Robert C. Weaver]—this March 8th meeting, it's the second meeting listed here. It says "regarding housing"; I don't know whether this is a discussion of a possible Executive order on housing or exactly what it involved. Maybe just the general VA policy on loans or something. Does that ring a bell at all?

GLEASON: Well, this was at a time when they were trying to get the economy moving, and Weaver was then in FHA [Federal Housing Administration].

HACKMAN: Right.

GLEASON: And, of course, although FHA started ten years before the VA housing did, VA housing was two and a half times as large as FHA. This was something that the White House at the time didn't focus on, you know. Veterans housing was so much larger than FHA, and yet it was just one aspect of VA. We were trying like mad to get housing started for the low—I mean, what

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the discussion was about was trying to spur the economy.

HACKMAN: Yeah, well, was there any disagreement among the a people who were there on what could be done just then?

GLEASON: Oh, no. I mean, it was a general discussion about what could be done both by FHA and the VA, because these are the two largest agencies. Yeah.

HACKMAN: Do you remember any decisions that came specifically out of that meeting?

GLEASON: No. This was something that we were trying to foster through the VA to all of the managers in the regional offices. It was taking around sometimes six to eight months to get approval. I think probably as a result of this meeting, we were able to cut this down pretty close to about forty-five days from the time they made application until the approval. There had been, oh, a backlog of I don't know how many hundred thousand. These are things that as we got into

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the program and once we found out what the White House was really interested in—you know, spurring the economy—this is when we tried to break the logjam.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Ever any push from within the administration on getting the VA out of housing loans that you remember?

GLEASON: Out of housing loans?

HACKMAN: Yeah.

GLEASON: There were always, you know.... I don't say that there was from within the administration. There were people, some of them over at the Bureau of the Budget that were interested in this, but I couldn't say that this was an administration move.

HACKMAN: Yeah.

GLEASON: I mean there were people within the administration certainly that were for it, but, once again, this phase of the Veterans, you know. Then you'd have the veteran going again to a hundred and twenty-three different bureaus or agencies trying

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to get all of his benefits. It was indirect opposition to the original policy in forming the Veterans Administration.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Do you remember getting involved in discussions of the Executive order that eventually came down on discrimination in housing and whether the Veterans Administration had a position that was presented at the White House, or working with HHFA or Weaver?

GLEASON: Well, I can remember the Executive order and, gee, we had some problems all over the country on VA housing. This dealt principally with VA housing that we had taken over, taken back where the veteran had just up and left. [Interruption]

HACKMAN: You were talking about problems on discrimination in the VA loans.

GLEASON: Well, where we ran into the discrimination was in the resale of veterans housing. I know on one occasion, I had to come to Chicago because out at the regional office here in Chicago

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certain real estate companies were given exclusives on this particular housing, and they were discriminating, as we found out in that investigation. Gee, there was such a furor created out here in Chicago that John Macer [Dan J. Macer]—the regional manager—who I'd kept on in Chicago, although John had been appointed in the Eisenhower Administration.... The mayor had talked to me about removing him and so on. But this was a great guy and a hell of a good man.

But John suggested that I come, and we had meetings here with many of the Negro leaders. They came up with evidence that they were being discriminated against. They would walk in and they understood that this certain house was for sale and they'd say, "Absolutely not," you know. Of course, they had people, white people that would walk in right after them and, "Oh yeah, let us take you over and show it to you," you know. Gee, when they

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came up with that concrete evidence, boy, we just took the contract away from them and then threatened them with turning over this information to the Attorney General for prosecution. This happened in many places. It happened in California, and it happened in New York City. It happened in many of the states down south. I'd say all of the larger metropolitan areas—Cleveland and so on—reported some.

HACKMAN: Yeah. What kind of relationship, if much of any, did you have with Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] during the administration? Were there other things in the Justice Department that involved him directly or his people?

GLEASON: Well, no, not.... Well, with his people, yes, in a way. At the time that I went in, if a veteran came to a hospital for treatment, he had to sign an affidavit that he did not have

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the wherewithal for private medical facilities. On instances that I know of, people would drive up in a big Cadillac car and get the hell out and go in. They'd drive up and another Cadillac would follow them with the wife and the chauffeur and the chauffeur would get out and take the one car, you know, and off they'd go. I mean, you know, it was just unbelievable. So I had Blake Turner [Blake E. Turner] check out a lot of people. When the hospital administrator would believe that this was a false affidavit, I had Blake check it out.

Then we'd turn it over to the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], and the FBI, you know, indirectly was the Justice Department. In the first year, we turned over a hundred and eighty-seven cases to the FBI and collected on every one of them, because, when the FBI walks up to the door and knocks on the door and says, "Are you Joe Doaks? Were

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you in the veterans hospital? Did you sign this affidavit?" god, the next day the guy's got a check to pay for it. So in that way, on occasion when I'd run into Bobby at the White House he'd say, "Gee, I think you're doing a great job in trying to not let these guys in, and so on and so forth. But, other than that..."

HACKMAN: How much publicity was given to that? Was there a conscious effort to give publicity to that or not?

GLEASON: No. No, not a conscious effort but it was well-known, thoroughly-known, through the veteran organizations.

HACKMAN: Yeah, right.

GLEASON: Then they didn't oppose it, you know, because if they did oppose it, it was going against their own.

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HACKMAN: Yeah. One of the things—this was after the President was assassinated but involves the Justice Department—was the prosecution of a case against, I believe, Matt McCloskey's [Matthew H. McCloskey, Jr.] construction firm because of the Boston hospital.

GLEASON: Well, that started even before that, you know.

HACKMAN: Yeah, right.

GLEASON: Oh God, I don't say that Matt himself was responsible, but, my God, you never saw anything like this at all in your living days.

HACKMAN: Yeah. I've heard a few stories.

GLEASON: I'm sure that this wasn't worked out for my benefit, but, my God, when I was walking underneath that hospital, bricks were falling out of the walls. [Laughter] I don't know whether you've been around construction much, but, you know, the facing brick generally adheres to the inner common brick with mortar, and so on and so forth. It wasn't here; it was just one brick piled on top of another. And, my God, you'd see a bulge start

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in the damn thing and, God, a week or two later this whole goddamn thing had fallen.

And the window frames, my God, actually.... We had sworn testimony where three patients were standing at a window, and one guy leaned against the window, and the whole goddamn frame falls out of the building. Gee, he damned near went with it, you know. Well, jeez, you ought to be able to go up and push against a window frame or any damn thing and not have fear of losing your life. This was just against a windowpane and that pressure alone a windowpane of his head—you know he was trying to look down to see something, with his head against the window itself—caused the whole damn frame and window to go right out of the wall. Jeez, it was awful.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Any problem in deciding though how to handle this?

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GLEASON: Oh, hell no. My God, sue them. You know, jeez. Now before we did it, I went over and talked to Larry and told him that I was going to do this. Then he called me up. Gee, I knew Matt, you know; God, I'd worked in the tax committee before him and so on, and treasurer [of the Democratic National Committee], and no problem or rancor or anything, you know. Gee, he had his subs and it's just one of those things that happens. And it was done under the Corps of Engineers [Army Corps of Engineers]; they were the ones that were in charge of it. At that particular time that it was built the VA didn't have its own construction.

HACKMAN: Yeah. You talked briefly about hiring policies of blacks within VA. Can you remember contacts with particularly the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunities, any of the staff people: Hobart Taylor, or John Feild [John G. Feild], or any of the others?

GLEASON: Well, I was a member of the committee and, of course, I've always been very

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favorably disposed towards this anyway. And so when the President issued his Executive order, God, this was food for the gristmill as far as I was concerned. God, it gave me every opportunity that I wanted, and we could enlarge upon it, and we did.

We had great problems in the South and called all of the VA managers together, and I told them quite frankly, "You're either going to accept this or you're not going to be on the federal payroll." They went to their congressmen and so on but it didn't make a damn bit of difference.

HACKMAN: You don't remember on that matter, Lyndon Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] who was the chairman or...

GLEASON: Lyndon came over and gave the talk for me on this particular day when I had all the managers in. When he left, they, you know....

HACKMAN: Yeah, but you don't remember he or Robert Kennedy or John Feild or Hobart Taylor being unreasonable on what could be expected out of

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VA, given the...

GLEASON: Well, there wasn't anything that they could say that would be unreasonable, because nothing was unreasonable to me; the sky was the limit. They didn't even have to talk to me about it. I was one of the great apostles myself, you know.

HACKMAN: We've talked about some of the construction projects, were there any requests for construction or modernization that you took for White House approval that they turned down, that they had serious problems with that you recall?

GLEASON: Well, at certain times, you know. . . . The only one that I really can recall where the Bureau of the Budget was just adamant and I couldn't get any assistance from the White House was in Milwaukee. We were rebuilding Wood Hospital, and we wanted to put air-conditioning in the hospital. This was a multi-million dollar project, and they were absolutely opposed to it.

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The Bureau of the Budget at that time had a criteria of a period of dry bulb reading and a wet bulb reading, so many days, certain humidity ratings and so on. If you met this criteria you could have air-conditioning. Well, they said in their investigation that Milwaukee didn't meet it. Well, we went through the United States Weather Bureau, which so far as we were concerned was, you know, the official one. My God, they met it, you know, but this didn't cut any ice. So, even with trying to get all of the congressmen from Wisconsin and the neighboring areas to assist us, we couldn't do it.

So we got up as far as the fourth floor—this must have taken us a year and a half to get that far—and then it was decided, jeez, we ought to put air-conditioning. Well, that cost us almost thirteen million dollars in addition to the air-conditioning fee. By this time,

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we had to tear a hell of a lot out, you know, rebuild. You just can't tear down four stories that you've already built. It was almost like taking an old hospital at that point. It could have been done at a saving of thirteen million dollars if we had done it originally; from then on, we really did run into the problems.

HACKMAN: Yea. One of the other things that some people were upset about was the transfer of the Dallas VA office to Waco. Do you remember that?

GLEASON: That really was a tough decision because Olin Teague wanted it out, you know.

HACKMAN: Yeah, okay.

GLEASON: If Olin Teague wanted it out, I didn't give a damn, you know, because as far as the veterans were concerned, I mean they had as far to go from one to the other. So it really didn't make a hell of a lot of difference, and the majority of the veterans in that regional area—no matter where it was at, whether Dallas or Waco—they were still going to have to go

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the same distance. So this was all right.

HACKMAN: Yeah. I wanted to ask you about when President Kennedy was assassinated and then the months afterward while you were still at VA, how your relationship with the White House, with President Johnson as compared to Kennedy and with the two staffs, changed? Was there any?

GLEASON Well, one thing I'd like to tell you is that—I don't know whether it had a direct bearing, but at least I've always thought that it had a bearing—when the President was assassinated, I was here in Chicago out at the airport getting on a plane to go back to Washington and when I got back there, there was talk in the newspapers, talk at the White House, that he was being buried in Boston. And I phoned Bobby Kennedy and this was, I think they arrived that night from Texas, the next morning. I talked to Bob and told him of the conversation

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that the President had had with me on the 11th of November.

That morning, which was Armistice Day—he always went over to the Tomb of the Unknown [Soldier]—he called me and asked me what time I was going out to Arlington [National Cemetery]. I said I thought I'd get there about ten or fifteen minutes before he was due to arrive, and he said, "Well, why don't you come down to the White House and we'll go out together." I said, "Gee, that's fine," because two of my sons—I have six—two of the

boys have never had their picture taken with him. So he said, “Gee, bring them along,” you know.

We went down, and he had a couple of people to see. Then, after that, we were out in the Rose Garden, and Caroline [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy] was swinging on the swings and little John-John [John F. Kennedy, Jr.] was running around—God, I’ve got the pictures of it—the boys had their pictures taken. I had brought

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John-John a little helicopter.

So when it came time to go, why, the President and I got in his car and John-John was sitting up in the front seat with those Secret Service guys, you know, the two of them. As we were driving along we came by the Lincoln Memorial, and he turned to me and he said, “That’s the most beautiful place in all of Washington, it’s fine enough to leave home for.” And he said, “You know, when I have great problem, I find great peace in going up there at night and I walk back and forth. I can look out over the city.” You know, these words are sort of emblazoned on my mind. “It’s like brilliant jewels. I get an inner peace and I can feel with what nostalgia General Lee [Robert E. Lee] must have felt in his heart and soul when he had to leave there to take the command of the Armies of the Virginias, never again to return.”

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HACKMAN: Yeah.

GLEASON: So I called Bobby and I told him this, and he said, “Well, I don’t think so.” He said, “I’ve never heard that he ever went there.” I said, “Well, the President told me that”—just the night before, two nights before November 11th, so that it would of had to have been the night of November ninth—“he took John-John up there with him.” He said, “I’ve never heard of him doing such a thing.” I said, “Well, I just want to pass that on, you know, for whatever it might mean.”

God, in about twenty-five minutes he called me back, and he said, “Jeez, I’ll never forget you,” you know. He said, “I never knew that he went there.” He said, “By gosh, he did.” He said, “I called Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] and we’re going to traverse that bridge and we’re going to bury him there,” you know. Well, I don’t know how much, what I did—telling him—had to do with

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his being buried there, but I’ve always felt that it must have had something to do with it anyway.

HACKMAN: Yeah, that’s interesting.

GLEASON And he was buried there two weeks to the day that we had gone with him. And Lyndon Johnson.... We all submitted our resignations, you know. I wanted to come back because I had no desire to stay in Washington. I wanted to get back to banking and home company operations here, and so, although everybody submitted their resignations, I was really sincere about it. The President called me over and asked me.... They announced at a meeting one day that the President appreciated having all the resignations but he wouldn't accept them, you know. Then I went over, I can't tell you exactly who I told at the White House, but mine wasn't just a perfunctory kind of resignation, I was really sincere about going and so on.

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HACKMAN: Yeah.

GLEASON: The President asked me to come over and talked to me about this. I said that I did have a keen desire to return. So he said, "Well, I'd appreciate it very much, you know, if you'd stay until after the election next year. And I'm sure that if President Kennedy had lived, you would have stayed." And I looked at him, I said, "Yes, I would have." He said, "Well, would you be good enough to stay." Well when you come right down to it, what the hell can you do. I would have stayed, you know, and I said, yes, that I would, but I did want him to know that I would like to leave after the election.

 He was always very nice to me, you know, great. I didn't particularly like him either as a president or as an individual. One day at a Cabinet meeting, he cursed and swore at one of the Secretaries—here he is, a member of his own

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Cabinet—because he was a minute late. The language that he used, I thought, was just deplorable for a President of the United States to use. If he'd ever said that to me, if he'd ever called me "a fucking son of a bitch," I would have gotten up and walked out and told him to shove his goddamn job up his ass. So it's just one of those things. To me it was like going from daytime to night time.

HACKMAN: Yeah. Could you see any difference in the way the White House staff operated toward VA?

GLEASON: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, as far as the VA was concerned, no. I really couldn't. In the Johnson administration, I worked closer with Lee White [Lee C. White] than anybody else. By that time everybody else was sort of leaving, you know. Lee stayed on and so I worked closely with Lee, and I had worked with him off and on in many

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instances under the Kennedy administration. Lee was just as grand to me as anybody could be. So I really didn't have many problems.

HACKMAN: Yeah. That's really all I have, I think. It's probably a good time to cut unless you can think of other things.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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