

Lee C. White Oral History Interview –JFK #5, 3/17/1970
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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 qualities and responsibilities of the White House staff during John F. Kennedy's [JFK] presidency and touches upon some of them during Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency as well. White also discusses what his own responsibilities included, among other issues.

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Lee C. White – JFK #5

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Fifth Oral History Interview

with

LEE C. WHITE

March 17, 1970
Washington, D.C.

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: As I indicated in the material I sent you, I'd like to talk about several things today. Whatever we get through we get through. If we don't make it, we'll pick it up another time.

First, I'd like to get you to talk a bit about the White House staff, and ask, first of all... and please feel free any time to go off into a tangential area, anything that you feel will be useful. I'm not committed to my

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outline by any means.

WHITE: Sure, I understand.

MOSS: Let me ask you what qualities President Kennedy looked for in a member of his staff?

WHITE: That's a tougher question for me to answer than a different question you might have asked which was, what qualities did I find there? I don't know exactly what he looked for...

MOSS: All right. Okay. That's fair enough.

WHITE: ... but I can sort of imagine on the basis of people who would up working for him. In so far as the tight circle around him, he was looking for individuals with a group of characteristics. Certainly one was native intelligence. Second, I think, he was looking for people that he knew. He was, as I viewed him, a man who did not have much difficulty meeting people. But to the extent that you being to depend upon or rely upon people, you'd like to have a pretty good idea of who it is that is taking your name and reputation and, indeed,

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your responsibilities -- and in his case, his power -- and using it. So that it is not surprising that people like Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] and Larry O'Brien [Lawrence F. O'Brien] and Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] and Pierre Salinger, to a lesser extent, were sort of in that first cluster of people that the President dealt with on a day to day basis. Fortunately, from his point of view, he had been in Washington, a United States senator and a candidate for office, for a long enough period of time that he knew an awful lot of people who had worked with him and in whom he had a great deal of trust and confidence.

So I think he was looking for intelligence. I think he was looking for a comfortable feeling in terms of his personal relationship with them. He was looking for loyalty. He was looking for people with knowledge and as deep experience as he could gather.

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There were some who came and had none of those things and still proved to be extremely valuable to him. One name that pops into my mind is Henry Wilson. Henry Hall Wilson, I don't think the President knew from a stick of wood. He came out of North Carolina; I don't think he knew what a congressman looked like except, perhaps, his own. And yet, by the time the President was assassinated, Henry Wilson was one of the important people on the White House staff. He didn't supersede Larry O'Brien in importance, but he was making a hell of a contribution.

I think those were the dominant characteristics that I detected in the people who the President relied on in the first instance.

MOSS: Okay. Any value at all on energy, stamina?

WHITE: I didn't mention it because, I guess, I just assumed it.

MOSS: Well, everybody does. I just thought I'd double check. You mentioned a tight little

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circle. Now, how far can you carry this metaphor and who would you put in it? You mentioned some names. Does Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] fit in there too? Or is he another...

WHITE: Yes. Well, Mac was not a known quantity to the President in the sense that he'd slashed through the campaigns with him and he kind of knew exactly how Mac would act. I think he was one of those that on fairly quick personal assessment seemed to have that toughness of mind, which incidentally may have been another characteristics which kind of weaves its way in with those that I ticked off. Mac was a crisp fellow who also put plenty of time in, who knew how to communicate. And, certainly if he didn't start off that way, on January 21, 1961, you can be pretty sure that by March 21, 1961 he was. Just the nature of his assignment and also because of the type of fellow that he is and was.

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MOSS: Were there successive circles of people? Would you say there was a second circle that...

WHITE: Oh, yeah. But anybody who would undertake to draw that would be a fool because, you know, it just doesn't work that way.

MOSS: It's too fluid to pin down.

WHITE: That's another point that I would emphasize. Just to use that relatively conventional figure of speech, I don't think anybody is capable of taking a snapshot of the White House staff or its operation or, indeed, even a motion picture film -- I take it what you're trying to do is to paint a portrait where you get impressions -- because the damn thing was different from week to week and month to month depending upon what was going on, depending on the President's mood, depending upon the activities of the people who were in the staff.

It was certainly a much smaller and more cohesive group than I found in President Johnson's [Lyndon B. Johnson] White House, and from what I gather from

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the press, President Nixon's [Richard M. Nixon] White House staff has gotten out of hand in a sense. You know, Christ, they've got bureaucratic problems of communications in interstaff relationships that are just essential if you're going to have that big a staff. I have a hard time visualizing how that big a staff can operate on a very successful basis, but that's somebody else's problem at the moment.

MOSS: What sort of things did the President do to make certain he got what he

needed from staff men? What were his ways of pulling a man up short to make sure that he got moving? Was there anything of this sort?

WHITE: I don't think of anything that falls specifically in that particular framework, but part of it was the selection process. By and large, I don't think he got people in there who were unresponsive to his demands and needs and requests. The President had conventional ways of letting

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people know that he was displeased. I felt that little lash. He wasn't a disagreeable, table-pounding type, threatening to emasculate you or to throw you out on your ear, but it wasn't hard to know when he was displeased, when things had not gone the way he felt they should have gone.

MOSS: Can you think of an example that might illustrate it?

WHITE: Yeah, I can think of an example. Fortunately I don't think there were too many of them that I was party to, but, let this be a mission against self-interest. He called me up on the phone one time and he said, "Did you tell the Department of Defense that they could permit something to happen?" And, of course, the way the question came out I knew that the answer should have been no. But it so happened that I had played a role in it and I said, "Well, Yes. I told Adam Yarmolinsky

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on the basis of a phone call" -- they had to have a decision in an hour about something happening out in South Dakota -- "that it struck me that what they proposed was not a bad approach. But I certainly didn't believe this was establishing some sort of a department-wide policy." He said, "Well, why didn't you call me?" I guess I fumbled around trying to figure out why the hell I hadn't called him. I don't know; he may have been busy or it may not have..... Yarmolinsky's call may have come at a time when I was otherwise heavily engaged in something.

Whatever explanation I had sure as hell wasn't adequate because the President was making it unmistakably clear to me that he was the President and that particular decision was one that he thought was important enough that he should have known about it. I think he was also telling me about that he didn't like what we had decided to do. Well, it didn't take me too

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long to figure out that on that one I had muffed it. And I didn't believe that it was up to me to submit a resignation or to go home and sulk, but to say, "Well, you know, what the hell. You can't win them all."

I have a hunch that subsequently when I was in a situation where I had staff people upon whom I had to rely.... you don't really fully expect you're going to get a 100 percent. What you can have is a certain minimum below which you can't go. Also you have your confidence in staff shaken, to the extent that a number of those incidents developed. But the answer to your question was the President, through direct telephone conversation, was making it crystal clear that that was a staff assignment not handled in what he thought was a satisfactory fashion.

MOSS: Were there kinds of things that he would do himself and others that he would delegate to staff members? Was there a clear line here

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or was it sort of catch as catch can?

WHITE: I'm not sure I can translate the question into specifics. I just don't think of any. Obviously there were times when it would have been better if he'd called the chairman of a congressional committee, but he may have wanted somebody else to do it, to use himself as a last resort if he had to, or maybe just had something else to do that was more important, maybe he didn't want to use up his credit. I don't know. He was obviously a pretty hard-working fellow as President. I don't think he put in as many hours, perhaps, as President Johnson, but I'm not even sure of that. I don't know. And hours are not necessarily the best test of a fellow's performance of his assignments. I just don't think of anything as an illustration.

MOSS: You talked about his using up his credit.

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This brings to mind the Neustadt [Richard E. Neustadt] book on *Presidential Power*. How seriously did he and the rest of you take that as not necessarily a model, but as good instruction on how to use presidential power?

WHITE: Oh, I don't think anybody on a calculated basis starting from the President going on down... [Interruption]

MOSS: We were talking about Neustadt's book.

WHITE: Oh, yes, and about husbanding this Presidential credit. I don't remember anybody ever saying, "This is not important enough to use the President on," or the President saying, "Oh, hell. I don't want to...." It's a concept that I think is ingrained in human beings but very rarely is articulated as the factor to make the decision yes or no. And just to round that out, I never had the impression that President Kennedy was sort of stashing us all away for a

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rainy day.

MOSS: The atmosphere in the White House, particularly in the early days, has been described as euphoria or ebullience, also, less kindly, as one of snobbish disdain for the abilities and problems of your predecessors. Would you comment on that and in your own words, comment on what the atmosphere was like?

WHITE: Well, I'll try to speak a little bit generally as I viewed it and also from my own subjective viewpoint, which I, of course, know better. From the general point of view, I thought it was a hell of a happy place. There was a sense of excitement. Admittedly we did have.... We, as is the editorial "we." Obviously as President everything stems from him. We had a fairly easy act to follow. President Eisenhower's [Dwight D. Eisenhower] presidency was relatively lethargic and phlegmatic and not a hell of a lot got done. The fact of the matter is, many of us

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who had worked on Capitol Hill had the feeling -- I don't know whether it's because it's the same feeling that each individual has as he goes through the clouds, wherever he is is where things are going on -- when we were on Capitol Hill that's where all the creativity and the excitement of the commotion and the policy making was.

When President Kennedy moved into the White House and a lot of us satellites went in with him, that's where we thought all the center of action was. And to an extent we figured it was again not a vote or anybody going around taking a pulse, but in the general sense there was the atmosphere of indeed, things were kind of rolling again as President Kennedy had promised as a candidate.

I shared all of that. And as one who had not worked in his campaign, I felt especially pleased and fortunate to be in the White House staff even though I don't think I deluded myself that I was, you know, one of those in that tight inner circle, and that if somehow or another I had

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to leave the White House, it all would grind slowly to a stop.

Euphoria is a little strong, but it was a happy atmosphere. There was relatively little interstaff knifing and backbiting. There was a little here and there that seemed to be to be way below par that you would expect in a pretty hotshot outfit with an awful lot of strong personalities. The one piece of cement, of course, was the loyalty, the devotion that all had to the President. I don't think very many of them failed to realize that it was a President's reflected power and authority and glory that all of us were partaking of. To some extent things always look better in retrospect than they do at the time, but I remember enough

conversations then to believe that's a fair way to characterize the attitude of the people who were in the staff.

MOSS: Some people have tried to make a distinction between the Irish mafia, so-called, and the

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so-called again intellectual group around Sorensen. Did this exist or not?

WHITE: No, not in my view. I was in the Sorensen apparatus, and I must say, I never had any sense of tension or strain between O'Donnell or Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan] or O'Brien or Dave Powers [David F. Powers] or any of that crowd.

MOSS: It's also fairly commonly accepted in the literature that this happy feeling, as you've described it, got a jolt with the Bay of Pigs thing. Now how long did this last? How deep did this go? And what effect did it have on you in the long run?

WHITE: Well, my knowledge of the Bay of Pigs incident was really sort of a limited to what I read in the newspapers and kind of corridor gossip or conversation. There was, of course, a jolt because the whole damn thing just appeared to be a massive blunder. But it's like so many other setbacks in life. It does not, in my view, take the role

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of a turning point or a hairpin turn where everything turned the other way. It was really just a period, and I guess, for some people it took a little longer than others to get over.

But I thought that the general spirit of satisfaction resumed rather rapidly and, in part I think, because of the public acceptance of the manner in which the President handled it. In a rather straightforward fashion he just plain said that a blunder had been made and that it was he who had made it, and he sure hoped to hell that he'd learned from it. I think, frankly, that that was acceptable to the American people. And even though there might have been a little of the cockiness that went out of the spirit that we couldn't make any mistakes -- again the "we" being that collective group. It was not a reversal. If I had to characterize it, I'd say it was just sort of a setback or slowdown or a bump in the road.

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MOSS: Another way that people tend to divide the staff up is those that left almost immediately after the assassination and others who stayed on for a time. Do you know of reasons why different people stayed on -- for instance, yourself, of course.

WHITE: Well, I think there was something to that. It's pretty difficult to put your finger on in any general sense because I assume each individual had to make his own decision and a lot of different factors went into it. With that big king-sized caveat and qualifier, it seemed to me that in my view of it, President Johnson was pretty straightforward and sincere. He told me as he told, I'm sure, everybody else on the staff in the straightforward fashion, looking you right in the eye, that "I would like very much to have you stay. If you want to leave, well, I'll understand. If President Kennedy needed you, I need you more because I'm coming in under such terrible circumstances."

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And I'm not so damned blasé that when the President of the United States of America looks me in the eye and tells me that he needs me, even though I may question how much he really does, I'll take that at face value and make every effort to work within that framework.

It took some adjustment and adaptation, but I personally was treated beautifully by President Johnson. And he had reason to have had -- grudge may not be exactly the accurate term, but he had reason to be unhappy with me. When he was Vice President and I was working on the Kennedy staff, without ever intending to do so, there were things that I did that I know irritated him. I can give you an illustration.

There were a series of meetings in the summer of 1963 with civil rights as the subject. President Kennedy met with various groups of leadership personnel from the country. He had one meeting with clergymen, one meeting

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with educators, one meeting with the labor leaders, with the businessmen and so forth. Since it was civil rights and since it was sort of a pattern that I'd been in on the outset, I had the job of preparing the memorandum that the President looked at just before he went to meet with these groups. The memo would be maybe three pages with some thoughts that seemed appropriate for that particular group and give him a little summary of who was there and the circumstances under which the names had been put together and any other stray thoughts that ought to be before the President as he walked in to meet with the group. He had told me that he wanted to make sure that everyone of those meetings that the Vice President was present and that the Attorney General was there. This we knew was going to be a series, and that was a clear enough instruction.

A couple of times -- just

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sheer oversight on my part, there was nothing malicious about it. I didn't tell the Vice President about the damn meetings, or if I did, I told him about it in his office the day of the meetings when he had to adjust things. So he could have easily assumed that I was somehow

or another trying to cut him out, which was not the case. But if he had assumed it was the case, I couldn't have blamed him.

And, again, through no intended mischief on my part -- we weren't necessarily as well unorganized as some White House staffs -- I'd dictate that damn memo into the typewriter about a half hour before the meeting. Not because I deliberately wanted to live dangerously, but it was just the way I operated and the way the ball bounced. So I'd run down; the President would be reading that thing and the poor goddamned Vice President of the United States wouldn't have a copy of it, because I would have forgotten to bring a copy. All I would have

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was my own copy and he'd have to look over my own shoulder to read it. I don't know if he felt uncomfortable or humiliated or embarrassed, but there was no intended demeaning of him or his office.

Yet, I just know full well that as a sensitive human being, had he decided that the one damn thing he wanted to do was get rid of that little squirt who had been making his life complicated, I wouldn't have necessarily been happy, but I couldn't have blamed him. And on the contrary there was not one recollection that came through to me on his part. He started with a clean slate and he treated me beautifully. So I never had that problem.

There were people on the White House staff who may have been more fiercely loyal to President Kennedy than I. They believed that they hated Lyndon Johnson, and if they'd known him, they would have hated him in 1956, and even though he may not have arranged the assassination, since

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he was the beneficiary of it, that they just couldn't in good conscience work for him. They saw it differently than I. Most of them, I think, made accommodations and moved on rather rapidly.

Without identifying them, I can remember a couple of incidents where after the assassination when Mr. Johnson was President of the United States, that there were a few people on the staff who treated him in a manner that I personally regarded as disrespectful. Well, I didn't like that and I wouldn't do it myself and I was sorry to witness it. I don't know if that's responsive to your question or not.

MOSS: Yes, indeed. I was just wondering curiously how... I can understand how it happens that a man gets so fiercely loyal and almost to the point of his losing perspective on the thing, yes, but it still puzzles me that they would

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go to the point of being disrespectful in a new situation.

WHITE: Well, it puzzled me too, and I don't think there's any justification or rational explanation for it. I'm not happier today thinking about it than I was at the time that I saw it. And I don't mean to suggest that it was widespread or that there were numerous incidents. Again, trying to run one's mind back a number of years, there are certain things that stick, and since this was so extraordinary, it did stick with me.

MOSS: Again, it's impressions as we were talking about earlier. I'd like to ask you, if you can recall, specific functions that some of the people had. It's quite clear in the material. Kenneth O'Donnell, of course, was the appointments man. It's also said here and there that he handled some political things, but these are never quite spelled out. Do you know what kind of thing he got into in

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the way of, oh, I don't know, what patronage or state party relations and this kind of thing DNC [Democratic National Convention] work?

WHITE: Yeah. I can only be extremely general about it, but that's right. I think on basic patronage or high appointments, for example, Ralph Dungan was the guy who had the duty of working with the President -- for example, if there was a vacancy on the Federal Communications Commission.

But one of the advantages of a small staff and one with a very high level of congeniality and mutual trust and really some admiration.... I've talked about some of the negative things that I've observed, but I just wouldn't want to leave a false impression. As a group there was really a remarkable degree of congeniality and cooperation and mutual respect.

Ralph Dungan had that responsibility, and I just can't believe that he would

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not have done an awful lot of base touching with guys like O'Donnell. If O'Donnell knew or remembered that this particular guy had been a special opponent of the Kennedys, or in some primary had worked the other side of the street, this isn't to say that he would have exercised the veto, but he sure as hell might have explained to Dungan that that guy you'd better look at pretty carefully for the following reason. Or he might have remembered that that guy was crosswise with a prominent Democrat in the Senate who might have to pass on the appointment. In short, I think, what the President got as a result of the way those functions were handled was a lot of different views woven into it without some sort of a formal clearing apparatus where a name had to have eighteen or five or six initials checked on it that every guy had seen it. There was informal clearing.

Or, to use another illustration, if there was an appointment to the Federal Power Commission, even though there

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appointments were not my bag, since Dungan knew that I was working with that group he would ask me whether I had any views or thoughts about this particular guy or who did I think ought to be on. Even though, as I say, appointments were something I very rarely got personally involved in.

But to go back to O'Donnell, this was the kind of a political clearing that he would perform. I know that there were times when the governor, for example, on a matter involving location of an interstate highway in his state, would get in touch with O'Donnell because O'Donnell was the guy that he knew. For all I know, he may have been on the convention floor handling a delegation that O'Donnell worked with. O'Donnell would ship him up to me, saying, you know, "here's a guy who's a good friend of ours. I don't know what the hell he wants, but you know, would you talk to him and see what his problem is."

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So to that extent, I think that many of the political leaders across the country who knew O'Donnell used him as their entry into the President or to elsewhere in the government or in the White House staff.

By the same token the governor of Nebraska, who happened to know me, if he couldn't get a hold of Sorensen who was also from Nebraska, he'd call me with a problem -- which, incidentally is another principal that I think you've probably heard before. And that is how to do assignments get handed out to the White House staff. Frequently it just depends upon who happens to know your telephone number and whose telephone call you happen to take.

O'Donnell had not only the function of appointments secretary but also, as you suggested, some of these political assessments and chores. And I think he worked with the Democratic National Committee and John Bailey and

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Louie Martin [Louis E. Martin], as did Larry O'Brien. I think too, he was properly regarded as the king of the staff. You know, if there were for example, such picayune problems as too damn many people using the White House staff mess to eat, there would be a memo from O'Donnell, probably prepared by somebody else, but they'd check with him and there'd be a memo saying, "Buddy, you've been assigned to the second group and you've been assigned to the first group and if you don't like it, go down to the damn Occidental and eat." O'Donnell in many ways is a very friendly and warm guy, but he had a gruff exterior and didn't like to engage in baloney.

But, for example, I think if the President were going out on a speaking tour, he was going to be out of town, it would be O'Donnell who would worry about the mechanics of it through a group of people. He'd call in maybe McNally [John J. McNally] or Dave Powers, Jerry Behn [Gerald A. Behn] of the White House Secret Service to work out the mechanics of the problems. He was

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indeed, in the true sense of the word, an administrative assistant to the President. Sitting right outside of his door, he probably saw him as much as anybody during the day.

MOSS: Okay. Now, Dick Donahue [Richard K. Donahue] was a congressional liaison, initially.

WHITE: Right.

MOSS: Now, was there anything else that he got involved in?

WHITE: Well, Dick was a very colorful personality and he had the assignment of working with some of the big-city congressman. For example, he was one of the few guys who could handle Adam Clayton Powell in a totally successful fashion. I'm sure that this isn't an exactly verbatim quote, but it wouldn't surprise me if it was pretty close to the target for him to call up Adam Clayton Powell and say, "Hey, you old black bastard, who have you screwed today?" He had such a delightful

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way about him that he really did work nicely with those people. When he left, there wasn't anybody quite who had that style and that technique to make it easy for some members of Congress to work with. But they got into some substantive matters, although, for the most part, people in the O'Brien apparatus used to send things over to those of us who worked with Ted [Theodore Sorensen] or got into programs or legislative policy issues. Although, again, there was no clear-cut thing.

One of the great virtues of the staff -- and I agree with the benefit of hindsight -- that everybody seems to be ten feet tall, and that wasn't, obviously, the truth. There were a lot of substantive issues where O'Brien's people had something to contribute, not only that they heard from Congress, but their own experiences or their own intellect had brought to their attention.

By the same token, it was not extraordinary for Mike Feldman [Myer Feldman]

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or for me, on a matter with which we happened to be familiar or with a particular committee chairman with whom we got along better than any of O'Brien people, to do some of his work. For example, on the House Interior [and Insular Affairs] Committee, Congressman Aspinall [Wayne N. Aspinall] and I just happened to get along first-rate. His former assistant Claude Desautels worked for O'Brien. And yet when it came to such tough matters as the wilderness bill, it was Larry's judgment that the best thing would be for me to go up and talk to Mr. Aspinall. He and I would talk about it ahead of time and I'd go up and talk to Mr. Aspinall. Because that one worked out well, and because it was a good illustration, I don't

mind repeating it. I kind of watched that. Despite everything that was going on at the time and a lot of the conclusions that the things weren't going to work, I believe that it was.

On one occasion Elmer Staats, the Deputy Director of the Budget Bureau, and I went up

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to see him. We couldn't have picked a worse day. It was the day that his wife, during the night, had had some heart difficulty and she subsequently died. But she had a bad night, and that morning the *Washington Post* had one of those wonderful Herb Block [Herbert L. Block] cartoons with Aspinall the villain of it, the tool of the vested interest holding up the wilderness bill. That very morning, we had scheduled for two days to go up and talk to him about the wilderness bill.

But it worked pretty well. About two weeks later I remember being in President Kennedy's office. This was in probably July, no, probably later than that, probably August or September of 1963. I don't remember exactly how I got in there and what the circumstances were, but I remember that in my reporting to the President I said that I really thought if he would call Aspinall, that we were close

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enough now that probably he would be able to reach some sort of an understanding. He took a quick look at the one-page summary of what the remaining issues were, called Aspinall and said that I was in his office and we'd talked about it, and that I'd given him a pretty encouraging report, and that he was awfully pleased that we were able to work out something. They had a long-term personal relationship, because as a congressman his office was across the hall from Aspinall's. The President hung up and said, "Wayne just promised me he'd have the bill. So you can forget about it, that guy keeps his promises."

We did not get a bill in 1963. In 1964 President Johnson was the beneficiary of this. Part of the legend of Johnson's legislative skills, which were damn considerable.... I don't mean to downgrade them, but just to give you one incident where that commitment and

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really all of the hard work and the negotiations and the compromising and the adjustment and the accommodations have been done. Aspinall, as President Kennedy said, was a man of his word. I don't know of any situation where he ever told us anything that he didn't stick by. He ran his own damn schedule, an awful tight man. He didn't yield except where he believed that he either should or else had to.

But it was, at least, illustrative of the way the staff operated on that kind of a matter. I was working the congressional side of things without O'Brien or Henry Wilson or any of those fellows feeling cross-eyed that, you know, we were sort of muscling in on their territory. There was, really, precious little of that. When the President would meet weekly

with the Congressional leaders, the night before, it wasn't always so formalized, but most of the time

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there would be a little session in either O'Brien's or Sorensen's office, where the guys who were alert to what was going on would be able to feed the material in so that somebody could write a memo. Normally it was Claude Desautels who prepared the memo as I recall, but not necessarily.

There was a lot of interchangeability for example, in the Sorensen wing of things, Mike would start off handling a drug bill and he'd be gone, either on a vacation or out of town on some matter or perhaps even just absolutely swamped on some other matter. And I'd take it over. And then I'm gone and Sorensen would take it over, without necessarily saying that each guy was as good as each other guy on everything or even abstractly. I kind of felt that it was a damn shame that Feldman was working on oil matters with the Interior Department when I was working on almost all the

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other Interior Department matters because, you know, our offices joined each other and we talked to each other. It makes it sound like a little chunk of heaven and nothing but a big happy ship, and there were, I'm sure, some tensions and rivalries, but in a general sense, what I've been talking about characterizes my recollection of the mood that existed there.

MOSS: Your talking about the congressional relations anticipates a few questions that I had. I've heard from some sources that occasionally there would be a lack of coordination in dealing with congressmen. For instance, a particular Congressman on a particular vote might be hit in succession by Larry O'Brien's people, by somebody from Sorensen's area, say, somebody from [Department of] Agriculture, and somebody from Interior. By the time he'd gotten through the third one of these, he was thoroughly

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exasperated at being approached again and again and again on the same thing.

WHITE: It is certainly conceivable; obviously, it wasn't by design. I don't think anyone believed the thing to do was to keep hitting a guy, especially if you've got him sold. If you haven't got him sold, I can understand where they'd say, " 'A' wasn't able to carry it off. Let's try 'B' on him." You know what the hell have you got to lose, if they guy is leaning negative to begin with, you know, why not. I'm sure there was some of that. I frankly had not heard any kind of a major complaint.

MOSS: This leads to a more general thing that crops up quite frequently. A curious

contradiction: the critics of the Administration saying both that the White House was too fast and hard in pressuring Congress and, on the other hand, too timid in pushing forward legislation. Would

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you comment on that?

WHITE: Well, anybody who wakes up one morning and finds himself in a public spot where people assess your efforts on a wide scale should recognize you're going to be criticized. You know, you just live with it. It doesn't mean the criticism is invalid. So that the extent that you're criticized from two different directions for the same act or failure to act really isn't totally surprising. I can understand where somebody who was trying to get some historical perspective on it would be a little surprised. Now which of these criticisms, if either, is the more valid of the two.

I think what you're really focusing on, though, are means rather than ends. When you assess an Administration, particularly with the benefit of some time, it's more important to figure out whether it was successful or unsuccessful and that it's legitimate to take a look at the tactics and techniques that were

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employed.

I guess if you were to put the question to me, did I think that enough effort had been expended by the President and Larry O'Brien and the people in the agencies to achieve the legislative end. I'd have probably said, yes. It seemed to me, and from what little I could see of it, it was a reasonably well-coordinated effort. You know, we didn't move everything that we wanted to move, but I would not characterize it as underdone. I'm sure I would never characterize it as being overdone. I think you can overdo things and you do have to be leary of creating the impression of arrogance and authoritarianism. But, I guess, you just got too soft a guy to talk to, because I thought the balance was a reasonable one. I don't fault the President or Larry on that.

MOSS: This leads, I think, to the next question that historians will be asking years from now and

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that is: Would the Kennedy programs have gone as well in Congress in 1964, 1965 had the President lived?

WHITE: Well, obviously, that's a totally speculative realm. I don't know how the hell can give you an authoritative answer on that because there isn't any. But

labeled as sheer speculation, I do have some views. I think a lot of legislation that was enacted would have been enacted. I think some of it, in '64, I think, for example, the Civil Rights Act would not have gone through the way it did go through, but there would have been a Civil Rights Act in 1964.

In my view one of President Johnson's greatest contribution was to move in quickly after the assassination to give the nation a sense of leadership. It really was a tough spot. I think, in large measure, his overwhelming majority in 1964 stemmed only in part from the fact that

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Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater] was the opponent. I think there was also just a residue of gratitude the American people felt towards this man who'd picked us up at a time when, hell, none of us knew how to handle ourselves when the President of the United States, especially such a young and attractive and glamorous one, was assassinated. So I think that President Johnson did very skillfully capitalize on that national goodwill that he had developed.

But a lot of these things were coming to fruition that would have been enacted in 1964. But even if they weren't, assuming, which I guess your question does, that Goldwater was the candidate against Kennedy -- I have no reason to believe he would not have been. Johnson got 64 percent of the vote or 63 percent of the vote, you could have looked for President Kennedy to get 70 percent of the vote. I think, I don't know, maybe not. I don't know. There may have been through.... Anyhow, he

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sure as hell would have had a powerful mandate. And I assume he would have brought into office with him some of those same forty-seven Democrats that Johnson did. So that '65 may have been a golden year for him too. And '66, not quite as golden, but nonetheless pretty good. I don't know. I suppose you get as many answers as you get people you ask the question of.

MOSS: What sort of things were you all doing in the way of gearing up for 1964 in the early fall of '63?

WHITE: Well, for one thing, I, as a White House staff man who sort of worked in the resources area, had undertaken to move to most of the regional meetings of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. Rural Electric Co-ops were a group that, I think, supported Kennedy over Nixon. It's basically a rural group with relatively Conservative leanings.

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But this was an area where President Kennedy's performance was quite good. And especially when we weren't sure who was going to be the opponent but it looked like it might be

Goldwater, this looked like a hell of a good group to cultivate. I was *the* guy that the President said, well, "Why don't you go to some of these meetings, and you know, carry the word. If you learn anything that ought to come back, why let us know." I wasn't particularly a political operative, but that was one of the few things that I was personally aware of that was being up for the '64 election.

MOSS: As I understand it, you were involved in a group that included Southwick [Paul Southwick] and Bill Keel [William A. Keel, Jr.] and Sorensen that was sort of getting together research stuff from the different departments and so on. How was

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this handled? Why was it moved out of DNC [Democratic National Committee] into the Executive Office Building?

WHITE: I don't know. I guess all I remember is Ted having that meeting, or maybe a couple of meetings. I think the reason is not hard to come by. The same damn reason would be true if I happened to be President or perhaps if you were President. If you've got a policy-clearing, generating and refining machine because you're responsible for the White House, and the Executive branch of the government, it does make much sense to have a duplicating, or even worse, a competing one outside. You might as well use the resources you have. I wouldn't expect, for example, that if President Nixon is running in '72 for re-election, he's likely to ask the then chairman of the Republican National Committee to be sure to set up a first rate research outfit. It just seems kind of self-evident to me that a guy, especially in the

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case of a Sorensen who was sort of the head of that policy operation in '60, who was doing the same damn thing as assistant to the President, not to have him do it for re-election would be.... I just couldn't fathom that.

MOSS: To what extent was there a sense on the part of DNC that they were being shoved aside? Was there any resentment here?

WHITE: I don't know. If there was, it certainly didn't come through. But again, without trying to paint it strong than it is or to bring in thoughts of ruthlessness or anything like that, it would be idiotic to do otherwise.

MOSS: How useful was the stuff that was coming in from the Departments, the summaries of what the Departments had done and this kind of thing?

WHITE: I can't remember well enough to give you an informed answer. I assume,

simply because of

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our own attitudes about the stuff that we got from the Department, that there was quite a variation -- some very good and other's pretty crummy and most of them in between.

MOSS: Okay. Let me go back to some people now. Harris Wofford and Frank Reeves were basically in the Civil Rights area, is that correct?

WHITE: Yes, although Harris had two bags; one was Peace Corps and the other was Civil Rights.

MOSS: Were there any other things that they got into, do you recall?

WHITE: No, I don't think so. Although Frank Reeves, of course, I believe. I don't remember the President having whispered in my ear that he was slated to be the first Negro to serve on the Board of Commissioners. He got wound up in his income tax problems and, of course, got torpedoed, but I assume therefore, that when he came into the White House

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staff, it was with the understanding or the implicit assumption that he would -- maybe six months or so -- June I don't know, whenever the term expired -- be appointed to the D.C. [District of Columbia] Commission. So I presume, therefore, that he also concerned himself with District matters.

MOSS: Do you recall what sort of things Brooks Hays was doing?

WHITE: Of course, Brooks didn't get there until the massacre of Thanksgiving.

MOSS: Right.

WHITE: Yeah, Brooks, bless his heart, really didn't get into anything with a hell of a lot of substance. He was a very, very pleasant and decent guy who would go around and speak to religious groups and to college groups. Generally, oh I'm sure he sent memos to the President occasionally on matters that occurred to him. He had, of course, been a member of the Board of Directors of TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] and every once in a

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while a TVA problem would come in through him. Although, normally they came in through me, partly because that was my assignment and partly because of my background with TVA people. But without trying to be patronizing to Brooks, he just wasn't part of the operating apparatus. He was an older gentleman, his style was totally different, and I just don't think that he, in any real sense, was a part of the White House staff, if I understand that term to mean the operating end of it out of the West Wing.

MOSS: Well, along the same lines, how integral to the staff operation was the Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton] and later Reardon [Timothy J. Reardon, Jr.] operation?

WHITE: Those are two different ones. And you can't quite regard them in my view as interchangeable or synonymous. Dutton, of course, came in right at the outset. He had the designation of

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Special Assistant which was the signal that he was one of the big boys. There were two things that distinguished him, first was where he sat. He was in the room right next to O'Donnell's room. Second, he was interested in issues. He was a man who knew a piece of policy when he saw one. He was also the Cabinet Secretary, which can be a mechanical administerial or it can allow an energetic, resourceful and dynamic guy to cream off some of those issues that float by on that assembly line and make something of it. That is kind of the way he was.

When Fred left to go over to the State Department, he brought a couple of the files up to me. He said, "Look, just take these goddamn things and treat them like they've always been yours and see what you can do with them. The President's aware of them, and just talk to him about it after you've had a chance. If you have any problems, give me a call." He just wanted not to leave them untended.

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Ted Reardon, on the other hand, even though he was the oldest timer with John F. Kennedy -- nobody pre-dated him -- was not an issues man. He was basically a guy who handled a lot of administrative matters for the Senator, and when he became President handled some assignments for him that did not really go to the guts of what the Administration was all about. For example, I think I'm correct on this, the physical bit, you know Stan Musial's [Stanley F. Musial] thing.

MOSS: Physical fitness program.

WHITE: Physical fitness. Well, that was kind of a nice offbeat assignment. As far as I know, Ted did a good job. But, I can remember clearly one of the things that

Dutton gave me had to do with the stockpile, minerals resources stockpile. Senator Symington [Stuart Symington] had said this was a matter that ought to be looked into. Dutton was in the process of looking into

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it when all of a sudden he found out that he was going over to the State Department. He gave it to me and I followed it through. I can't quite stick it up with the Bay of Pigs or anything of that character, but it was an important, substantive issue that the Administration had to work its way through.

MOSS: Yeah, I'm curious about this. Had anybody else in the staff picked this up besides Dutton? Was anybody else aware of it?

WHITE: Ultimately, of course, we did some clearing with Bundy's people, but it was Fred who saw it somewhere on a report from one of the agency heads. Or it may have been Symington who got his ear at a party or something or just called him. I can't remember if I ever knew how Fred's attention was attracted to it.

MOSS: I was just wondering about the ways in which things came to people's attention on the staff.

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WHITE: Well, I just ticked you off there. One of them was through looking at a formal report turned in weekly or bi-weekly by an agency head. One of...

MOSS: Which was something that Dutton set up, wasn't it?

WHTIE: He set it up. And I don't know whether it was something that had been done in the Eisenhower Administration or not; I can't remember, but he certainly set it up. And, incidentally, as far as I know, through the end of the Johnson years, the thing was still operating, but primarily because Nellie Yates, who started with Dutton, was secretary -- a very bright lady. She was transferred with the assignment to Reardon and when Reardon left to go over to FDIC [Federal Depositors Insurance Corporation] she was transferred over to, I think, Valenti [Jack Valenti]. Then somebody else got it and she was transferred to that. So, I don't know where that fits into the analysis, but my own view is one of the

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reasons it never fell apart -- I don't know how useful it was, frankly; I found out one of its usefulness was when I left the White House and went to an agency -- but good old Nellie Bell kept that damn thing on a straight thread.

It did get useful to me on the other end of it, because even though I knew how little attention was paid to all those formal reports over in the White House, that didn't mean that I didn't want to send a good one as chairman of the Federal Power Commission, and to use it so the staff could bring to my attention which they thought was important. I'd scratch out maybe a third of the items I didn't think merited even getting to the White House staff, let alone to the President. But it did give me a sense of overview.

MOSS: We've been talking about Dutton and his position as Cabinet Secretary. What view did President Kennedy have of the Cabinet? What use

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could be made of it?

WHITE: I don't think I can give you much more than the conventional wisdom on that.

MOSS: Okay. From your own position how important was protocol in working with departments? Did you talk to a secretary or did you talk to a secretary's assistant in communicating with a department?

WHITE: I guess it might have varied a little bit, but I didn't see much problem there. I would talk with anybody, including the secretary of the department, down to somebody I knew. It just kind of depended on.... I think we had there in the Kennedy years a -- a lot of us -- I'm not sure about -- had a broad range of personal acquaintances and old associates. For example, my law partner, Milton Semer, was General Counselor of the Housing [and Home Finance] Agency. And I just knew damned well -- that was one of the agencies I sort of worked with -- that if

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I couldn't get Weaver [Robert C. Weaver], all I had to do was talk to Semer. Because Semer and Weaver were that close and that interchangeable, so it didn't bother me. Or if it turned out that the matter involved something in one of the sub-units, I could call the guy over, sure, I could call Phileo Nash, who was the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, just as easily as I could call John Carver, who was the Assistant Secretary and in whose jurisdiction that particular office was located. Sometimes it just depended on who was in town.

MOSS: This didn't bother people at any time? None of the secretaries got ticked off at it or anything of this sort?

WHITE: Of, it might have. I don't know. But nobody made an issue of it. The only issue I remember was kind of cute. I don't know, I suppose these things aren't

going to be out for a long time. One secretary called Sorensen -- this was probably the second month -- and said that Lee White had had a meeting on a matter and he hadn't been invited and he was kind of unhappy. Sorensen called me and

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said, "Secretary X is a little ticked out. He said you had a meeting on some subject and he wasn't there." I said, "Gee, you've got to be kidding. Anyhow, would you please make an announcement that any meeting I have is open to any member of the Cabinet." Hell, you know, this was just a drafting matter, and he'd have been out of his mind to want to get there. But I remember clearly how pleased I was to be able to go home and tell my wife that Secretary X was all a twitter because I'd had a meeting and he hadn't been invited to it. But that was rare and that was early.

MOSS: I don't want to push you on names. But, of course, you can put whatever restrictions you like on these tapes so that it's your choice to use the names...

WHITE: Oh, I don't think it's very offensive. It was Secretary Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon]. I don't even remember what the hell the matter was.

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But, as I said, this was very early. I just don't think of that as a problem. Now, maybe my eyes don't detect those things, or maybe the things that I was involved in never got anybody cross-eyed. But, I must say, I was very pleased to find out that, by and large, even as relatively down the line as my position was, when I called a Cabinet officer I almost always got a call back pretty quick.

One of the assignments that I had was in a series of meetings that the President had with Committee chairmen, just went right down the damn list. And in preparation for that, I would talk with the Cabinet officer of the Departments that were involved in that committee's jurisdiction. I'd talk with O'Brien and whoever else, and put together a couple of pages of notes for the President to glance at before he met with the committee chairmen. Even though I

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had nothing to do, for example, with international matters or defense matters, both Secretary Rusk [Dean Rusk] and Secretary McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] were extremely helpful in ticking off [snap, snap, snap] as fast as they could talk items that they thought out to be in the paper. I presume that paper also went to Bundy to add his words to.

MOSS: I saw you checking your watch. Would you like to cut this off now and pick up another time?

WHITE: Yeah. I'd say. It's quarter to four and....

MOSS: All right. Surely.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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