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By James J. Rowley

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ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

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INTERVIEWEE: JAMES J. ROWLEY
INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN
DATE: January 22, 1969

M: Let's begin simply by identifying you, sir. You are James J. Rowley, Director of the United States Secret Service, and you have held this position as director since 1961. Is that correct?

R: That is correct. Actually, when I took office it was "chief," and then some three years ago approximately, there was a reorganization and they changed the title to "Director" and four assistant director positions were established. They supervise four different sections of our organization.

M: And your service with this organization under its various setups goes back into the late thirties, I believe.

R: Yes, '38, September 12, 1938.

M: To the exact day. And then you went on the White House detail, I believe, in 1945. Is that correct?

R: No, on the White House detail I reported in 1939, around February.

M: So you were through the Roosevelt times as well as--

R: From the Roosevelt times. I must have spent a total of approximately twenty-two years on the White House detail as a special agent assigned to shifts and later as a supervisor in charge of shifts and then eventually in 1946 I was appointed special agent in charge of the detail. So I was, I would say, about fifteen to sixteen years in charge of the White House detail until I received the appointment as Chief.

- M: Mr. Truman, I believe it was, was quoted in last Sunday's paper in an article about your organization as saying that the Secret Service was the only boss that the President of the United States really had. Is there a good deal of truth in that?
- R: He did say that but he was trying to make a point at the time actually to demonstrate that the reason he couldn't do this or that is because the Secret Service was opposed to it, you know, from a security standpoint. But he did say and very eloquently that one of the great people that he would miss when he left office was the Secret Service.
- M: I think that is a fairly common comment.
- R: Well, I heard that from former President Eisenhower, and I think more recently, in awarding me this Distinguished Federal Service Award, President Johnson in the presentation practically said the same thing.
- M: How often in the White House, in kind of a general way, is it necessary for the Secret Service to tell whoever happens to be President, "Mr. President, you can't do something you intend to do because of security requirements?"
- R: Well, I think most Presidents have responded to our requests because when you point out to them the situation and so forth, they recognize it is in the interest of their safety, and that we are not arbitrary. And more particularly today when, after the assassination, we have a great number of people out doing intelligence work in cooperation with the local police and other federal agencies in the area so as to determine what the climate is. So when you have specific information, then you prepare accordingly, and in preparing accordingly, you advise the President and members of his staff.

- M: How much influence, if any, does a President have over selecting the particular agents that are assigned to him?
- R: Oh, we assign the agents.
- M: You assign them entirely?
- R: Right. We assign the agents. I think I see the reason for your question. What happens is that a candidate or a nominee who wins the election having been close to the group and particularly one man who is in charge will indicate a preference for that man. That frequently happens, you see. So this is where you might get an indication for preference.
- M: Right. This is what I had in mind.
- R: No, we have the responsibility for assigning the men.
- M: But if the newly elected President expresses a preference for a certain man, you're generally willing to assign that man.
- R: Well, yes, certainly, because there's a rapport there, and when a new man comes in it's an advantage because there's an understanding there and and it makes it much easier for us to present our problems to the extent of what we think is good security and what we think is bad security as it pertains to that individual.
- M: Mr. Johnson, as President, got into the press sometimes unfavorably because of his occasional flare-up at the Secret Service, people who were guarding him, and I think when he left he apologized or made reference to his occasional flare-ups. What were the things he objected to that caused his occasional displeasures with the Service?
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- R: I don't think I would be qualified to go into that, because not being in charge of the detail, I was not present on the day-to-day basis. What I would have to answer you would be purely hearsay. I've gotten it from Mr. Youngblood and Mr. Johns and you can confer with them because they were in charge of the detail. I don't think it's any different from any other President, but the press happened to be present at the time.
- M: It's not more frequent in your opinion than other Presidents?
- R: No, I had the experience in some instances where there might have been something that wasn't directed necessarily at the Secret Service because we had no involvement, but we happened to be there at the time. If you were an observer you could have said, "Well, maybe he's talking about the Service," or something like that.
- M: They were just handy--
- R: That's right. So you have to discount a lot of that. And then too, let's face it, we cover a multitude of sins when it comes down to something like that.
- M: Were there any special problems in connection with guarding President Johnson as compared to other Presidents, any greater difficulties because of the way he did things?
- R: No. Let me put it this way. Having had the experience with a number of Presidents, no President who previously had the freedom such as President Truman and Kennedy and Johnson, I select them, you understand why I skipped two, and then to suddenly be restricted in their actions and so forth,
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why, it's a little difficult for them to adjust. Now, it wasn't for Roosevelt, because he wasn't ambulatory. And we used to hear the people's surprised remarks that saw him in the wheelchair. They couldn't believe it because his image was standing, although holding on to the arm of an aide.

M: I have to admit I lived my first fifteen or sixteen years under Roosevelt and I was a grown man before I knew that he couldn't stand.

R: That's right. The other one--you see, we were fortunate that President Eisenhower, having been Commanding General, had been exposed to all of this security, he could understand it. And so that's why the others having been civilians and so forth were rather free. But Mr. Truman understood it after awhile; Mr. Kennedy, being younger, liked to move around faster, as well demonstrated in the campaign; so did President Johnson. He stopped the car and went right into the crowds. There was a lot of concern for that but on the other hand what worked to our advantage in anything like that is the element of surprise, you see. So we're flexible enough to meet a given situation.

M: Any attack under those circumstances could hardly be premediated.

R: That's right.

M: Does this apply to such things, what was it, the 1964 convention, where Mr. Johnson went into the crowd so greatly--

R: Yes, you have to compare it with previous Presidents; they didn't do that you see. And he went into the crowd; it was a little different. And I

think in the succeeding years you'll see another Presidential candidate do something else different, but we necessarily have to be flexible and anticipatory too. I can't necessarily go into the deployment and the security setup, so that all I can assure you is that we are flexible.

M: What about the Johnson family, Mrs. Johnson and the girls, particularly the girls courtship that took place while they were in the White House. You don't use women agents, as I understand it. Does this cause some special difficulty when you have young ladies like that in the White House?

R: No, in this case this was the first time--the previous time was Margaret Truman and of course, we had very nice arrangements, there and it worked out quite well. I must say that in this instance it was extremely--I don't want to say fortunate--but it was an extremely gracious relationship. In other words, these girls were most understanding and they were appreciative of the agents and Mrs. Johnson cooperated--in fact they all cooperated--very well. And the rapport with our people was tremendous, and there was nothing that was of an unpleasant nature--the best relationship to the extent that our boys were discrete to that extent and in no way did any untoward incident or unpleasantness develop during the whole five years.

M: Yes, you may have the same type of problem.

R: But I must say in all frankness that the relationship was excellent to that extent.

M: Is there some kind of special problems for your agency posed by situations

such as existed during Mr. Johnson's time, when there's considerable amount of dissent in the country, and yet he wants to travel around to various places within the United States. Do you have to do things differently now than you did say for Mr. Kennedy or Mr. Eisenhower under similar type circumstances?

- R: Number one, because of the tragedy we've found we had to have more personnel and resources, if you want to get into the background, and therefore to do your job properly in the present day climate, you have to have these intelligence agents and very close cooperation with the local police and other federal agencies, as I earlier indicated, so that you've got the latest current information of what the thinking is. And based on that you report into your assistant director which is Mr. Johns of Protective Forces, and advise him of the complete situation. And he, in turn, would take it up with the President, or his staff, depending on the information. We have had—I can't think of any incidents that would have deterred him from going, you know. There might have been some speculation, I suppose, where there was an indication he might go and yet didn't go, but then most of those incidences developed as something else happened in other parts of the country, and he had to cancel. And I think this is one of the reasons he was most careful of not making a firm commitment in a good many instances.
- M: His critics during this particular time, 1967 particularly, early 1968, were saying it was impossible for Mr. Johnson to travel in the United

States safely; therefore, he was having to make his public appearances at military bases, and things of this nature. Was that a true charge, or is that exaggerated?

R: No, I think they had to say something, I suppose, but that would not be a true charge as far as we were concerned and the President was concerned, because we would coordinate our security with the local police and anybody else to fit his schedule. I don't know that he had gone into any military bases in lieu of appearing in the public. I think the pressure of work was such that he couldn't and he had to resort to television and some other things because I don't think you can fault a man who has worked from eighteen to twenty-two hours a day because of the events that required his immediate attention, that you could fault him to the extent that he had to resort to this approach rather than getting into the public. Now he couldn't, in many instances, he couldn't commit himself even for a dinner in New York, but then when things subsided, particularly in various parts of the world, he could then go up to a dinner in New York, and with the aid of a jet, you see, a jet accomplishes a lot; this is why he was in a position to take advantage of certain options without making firm commitments.

M: What does that do to your planning?

R: We're used to it. We've lived through the evolution of transportation so that we're geared to meet the situation, so that everything is on the line as it were, ready to go, so we're not taken by surprise. And you see

this evolution, of course, was gradual, and I've witnessed it from the train and the boat to the DC3 to the DC4 to the "Connie" to the jet, right on along the line.

M: Always making it a little bit more difficult for the Service because everything's a little faster.

R: That's right. So we have to have a comparable plane for our agents to move out. And we have affected that. We can't obviously work in a DC4 now and try and keep ahead.

M: The appearance would be over before you boys got on the scene.

R: That's right.

M: Had any planning been done or any specific action been taken in preparation for Mr. Johnson's proposed travel for the 1968 election campaign?

R: I don't know. I couldn't answer that one, quite frankly.

M: But the point is, again, some critics had mentioned at that time that one of the things they thought might have deterred his running again was his inability to travel.

R: Oh no, I don't think that. I think his statement in March was quite clear. I can remember during Roosevelt's time we spent the summer up in Hyde Park, Congress adjourned, and then toward the end of Truman's time, it almost became three hundred and sixty-five working days of the year, except for a brief two weeks down on the Key West in the fall and the spring, and an occasional trip to Kansas City for a week. And then with President Eisenhower who'd go through the summer until maybe September or October and then if you recall about the end of October we'd go away to either Colorado or some such place as that for the balance of the year. Then when Kennedy

came in there was very little vacation, and then with Johnson--the pressures mount up--so that we were in session three hundred and sixty-five days a year, except for an occasional weekend down in Texas.

M: What about the Texas operation, did that pose particular problems being out in the country as it were?

R: Not in an area as vast as that because it was all on his property and you could detect a stranger in that area, and we had the men deployed, we had only those who were familiar with the whole terrain down there, so you could spot a stranger immediately. Of course, naturally, we sent up our security crew so that it didn't pose any problem to us.

M: You've been in this agency through the growth or evolution of another custom too, the tendency of Presidents to travel abroad.

R: Presidents did travel abroad before, however, I think what started it was the Roosevelt period, the conferences with the Russians and the British.

M: Now surely you can't coordinate in the same way with foreign local officials as you do with American local officials. Is this a whole different operation?

R: Oh no, you do. While you're a guest, nevertheless they're most cooperative. And according to their customs and so forth, by and large their security is almost identical. In fact they're most agreeable in carrying out some of the closer security objectives that we have. As a matter of fact, after the visit they generally write and ask me if they can send somebody over to learn our methods. We have had incidences of

that kind.

Of course, during the Roosevelt conferences abroad you have the military involved and so forth, so you didn't have the local police to that extent. You coordinated with them. And then at the minor visit we made with Truman down in Rio, we had the Fifth Army because they're rather proud of their Brazilian forces that were attached to the Fifth Army and so we wanted to put them on display. Remember shortly after the war we went down to Rio, and they did most of the security work with us. Let me say this, in Latin America most of military is involved in the security because they don't have the high efficiency that they probably will develop now in the local police department, especially where there is any indication of demonstrations--it's a military thing. But abroad, it was Scotland Yard for example in England, and the Surete in France and the Italian police in Italy and German police in Germany, you had no problem at all.

M: It's not a great deal more risky for the President to travel abroad than it is at home then, you think?

R: No, I don't think so. I think most of the people of any foreign country would be deterred because they recognize this is a guest and I don't think they would--unless there was something malicious or some conspiracy or something from outside the country that would use the country as a scape-goat or something like that, of course. But I think by and large the demonstrations have not been of a nature that would alarm anybody.

M: There have been incidences, several of Nixon's--

R: Well, Caracas yes.

M: Eisenhower of course and the Japanese visit that was postponed.

- R: Well, that was done I suppose with a view of embarrassing the country, but I think what encouraged him was when they were able to force Jim Hagerty, who was on the advance some weeks before we were scheduled to visit there, to the helicopter and then fly from the airport to the Embassy. But they did continue to mount that up so that it would reach a crescendo on that day that we were scheduled to arrive. However, as you recall, Kisi withdrew the invitation while we were in Manila for the simple reason that actually the police were exhausted because they were battling them for a month, and they had no power to carry guns at that time because under the MacArthur ruling or whatever, he set up a time, so they were being battered and it wore them down so much. But that was one of the primary reasons because our people were there with them.
- M: Mr. Johnson had, perhaps not as serious, but an episode of the same type in Australia.
- R: Yes, that time there was a demonstration where they threw paint and balloons and so forth, but we were able to move along and effectively continue on the way. We knew they were going to do something like that, but not when. Of course, it came after they made a turn, you know, someplace; there was no indication of prior activity, you see. They threw these balloons over and they happened to hit the car, and Mr. Youngblood--I guess he told you about that, so you have the details on that.
- M: This type of thing was not a serious attack on the President's life, so much as just a demonstration.

- R: Just a demonstration and just to show before the TV cameras, just to show what that can do and the proximity they can do the thing, so the question I think in a lot of these incidences and demonstrations is embarrassing the individual. I daresay that if the TV and the cameras just ignored most of these people, you wouldn't see any of this.
- M: When you're apprised of the possibility of this type demonstration, you don't then advise the President not to go to this place?
- R: Well, it all depends on how serious it could be. You don't invite him to go into a lion's mouth, you see; you have a certain responsibility there. No, I would say if it were very serious we would veto it, suggest that he not go there. You know the instructions, the guidelines we had for the candidates, not to ride in an open car, not to get into an area where there was no avenue of evacuation, which is consistent with our policy.
- M: What about things non-public, like crank letters, and crank telephone calls? Does the Secret Service process these?
- R: Yes, we process all this. This is part of our intelligence division, and we have been successful in identifying anonymous letter writers and so forth. And we have quite a division now in that regard and they're most helpful to other agencies. All these calls are pursued and so forth--we have to run them out to satisfy ourselves whether this represents a potential threat to the President or Vice President or others that we protect, either by an individual or group.
- M: What quantity are there of these? Are there a lot of threatening type letters and phone calls to the President?
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R: Oh yes, I don't know now at the moment; I can't answer because this is a new Administration.

M: Under Mr. Johnson.

R: Well, it's been--it fluctuates, interestingly enough. We keep statistics, monthly statistics on the type of letters we get, obscene, threatening, suicide and others. You may have so many one month, and you may have dropped down to maybe half, you know, and then something else may have occurred, some event, and it jumps up again.

M: They do correspond to actions that the President has taken?

R: That's right.

M: Had there been more of this type of thing for Mr. Johnson than for previous Presidents?

R: I can't answer that unless I study the thing. I wouldn't want to answer it unless--but I would say in some instances, depending on what the barometer indicates, there could be. I think sometimes, quite frankly, you have to consider the period when we make comparisons. You can't compare a tranquil period, if you will, during the later Roosevelt days and of course you had the war, then after the war President Truman's, you know--you've got new generations coming up and the outlook is entirely different, so that it sometimes--I don't think comparisons are quite accurate, or proper in those circumstances when you analyze the thing. You're confronted with different situations. Who'd ever think here in our day you have this fad in college about eating goldfish and stuff like that, and you got a lot of publicity to the extent that it attracted attention. But now you have something else; you have a different mood and you have different procedures. As a personal observation, do we know if

this is an intent to erode the high standards and qualities of the universities today to bring you down to a much lower level, you know, so that you're on par with a certain group that I would say would like to control it or do you get into a situation in the ultimate where the have-nots become the haves? These are the things you have to study today in the universities.

M: Kind of compare that to an earlier year.

R: That's right. These are the things that develop, you know, and that's my own personal observation. When you see, say, sixty-five people take control of the building, or seventy people, what's the objective? Why don't they sit down and negotiate? Now, we think that you should establish with this particular department or this particular culture. But this is done overnight and nobody has a chance to digest what they want. Obviously they must recognize that you can't accomplish things overnight.

M: They are finding that out.

R: Yes. They are saying, push, push, push; but why the push?

M: What is done with this crank mail, incidentally, as a matter of personal curiosity?

R: It is filed with a report. We have agents that are in there that screen and evaluate all these letters, whether it warrants an investigation, and if it does, it is sent to a particular office where they identify the person and investigate.

M: Letters are not destroyed?

R: No, they are retained because, you know, you may get a letter from over the years, for example, of people who have written to a previous administration, and five years later the same person writes to this administration.

Very often in those cases there is a little mental [problem] but not of a serious nature where they have to be committed; some of them have some lucid moments. Also, we have found that initially they start writing to a state legislator, then to a member of the Congress or the Senate, then they eventually end up writing to the President or Vice President.

M: You mean they work their way up?

R: This is why we encourage people like legislators to send us any information.

M: And do they?

R: Oh, yes, because that gives us a handwriting specimen; they very seldom change, and we have handwriting experts as well. And this is why the evaluation is done by special agents who have been engaged in such investigations and they know pretty much by the tenor whether a case or-- I don't mean to say that we have to be selective, but we don't investigate all of the threats and so forth. There might be a hoax, or a call may be from somebody who has been drinking and picks up the phone.

M: It's easy to get the White House number.

R: That's right.

M: I know you've gone through it a million times and I have no intention of even seeking to go through it--are there any aspects of the Dallas tragedy in 1963 involving Secret Service operation that you think have been neglected in all the public comment that has been occasioned by the post-analysis that has occurred?

R: No, we only investigated the tragedy for two days and then the President wanted the FBI to take it so we backed out, you see. We assume that everything was done properly and correctly. That was the conclusion of

the Warren Commission. We did take affidavits from all of our people, and that's all a matter of record. We had no credible information that there was a conspiracy. That was a question posed to me when I testified.

M: Most of that is already on the record. The Warren Commission recommended quite a lot of changes, reorganization of the Secret Service. Have these recommendations been effected in the years since then?

R: Oh, yes, and with the cooperation of the Congress, appropriations and so forth. We have this automation now which was one of the principal recommendations; we have communications; we have sophisticated equipment that is appropriate to our responsibility. So we are a completely different organization today than we were before.

M: They recommended, I believe, specifically, that it be reorganized and within the Treasury Department as it had always been. There was some discussion that maybe it ought to be part of the FBI. Is that a practical or feasible future development?

R: Well, I can only answer that because the conclusion was that we were structured so--you see, to have a dual responsibility. We have sixty-two offices around the country, and we have the responsibility of protecting the person of the President or Vice President as well as protecting currency of the United States. And so the field is always available to augment the protective details of men, and having established these offices we are in daily contact with the local police, and so we have the rapport, and so in a lot of these difficulties we receive the assistance of the police. This is in that testimony of one of the appropriations hearings by one of the secretaries of the Dillon Committee, in

which he said that we were so structured that we handled the work and were determined to leave it in the Secret Service. To be assigned to another organization would be expensive. We know that Mr. Hoover has told the Warren Commission and the Dillon Committee, which was to analyze the recommendations of the Warren Committee, that there was nothing wrong with the Secret Service that additional personnel and new equipment couldn't correct. But I'm hopeful that we are strong today and progressive in the area of sophisticated equipment and that we would be able to withstand any proposals of that kind. Unless you get to the point today where somebody proposes a national police organization.

M: Of course one of the reasons why that type of thing gets suggested apparently is that there is at least a suspicion that sometimes coordination between the various elements is not as good as it might be. What about your coordination with the FBI, for example? Can you work cooperatively with them without difficulty?

R: We have for years. I so testified before the Warren Commission. I had been a former FBI agent so that I have not had any problems even when I was a special agent in charge of the White House detail. Whenever I found it necessary for laboratory analysis and other things, I simply called the liaison man and said, "We want this checked," and they did it without question. You must remember until the tragedy there wasn't that need to ask assistance except in certain areas that gave us concern.

And since I became Director, we have had excellent cooperation even before the tragedy and more so since the tragedy, and with the too; we have not had any problems with the CIA.

M: No jurisdictional difficulties?

R: No, no. Obviously the CIA is foreign intelligence, the FBI with internal, and we are concerned with the protection of the President and with counterfeitters. So we are not usurping anybody's area, nor are they usurping ours, except that they provide us information such as a report that John Jones was overheard to say that he was going to assault the President or the Vice President. They notify our local office and they notify their headquarters who notifies us here and so it is a double check. And we dispatch an agent to check it out.

M: The instance that came to my mind, I recall reading in Time one which, I believe it was the FBI declined to investigate--what was the ship that burned down here--Yarmouth Castle, and then the Secret Service investigated that. Is that not correct?

R: Of course, you're going into days before I--at the time of the Morro Castle I think I was still in college.

M: No, Yarmouth Castle. It was fairly recently. I seem to be recalling an instance where the FBI didn't get involved and the Secret Service did instead.

R: They may have used the Secret Service--maybe for some reason the Coast Guard would get into it, and that was then part of the Treasury Department before it was transferred to the Department of Transportation. But we wouldn't have had any jurisdiction on that. I recall--I think the Coast Guard was the one that went up there to testify. We had some laboratory

work that we were requested by the Coast Guard, because we are another Treasury member.

M: Does the President ever get involved in aspects of the Secret Service duties not connected with his own protection? I mean, does he ever get involved in your counterfeiting activities?

R: No, but sometimes he might see something in the headlines, and he might make inquiry of the agents with him. President Truman would read the paper before he went on his walk, and anything he'd come across that would pertain to us he might ask a question, but nothing as to how we conduct our work and how our Department is functioning. Whatever question he might ask would be a question out of curiosity.

M: Mr. Johnson was supposed to have been a great telephone man who picked up the telephone and called people frequently. Did he call you that way frequently?

R: Well, yes, in the early days he called me until such times as we had permanent men on the detail, and then he would call Mr. [Rufus] Youngblood most of the time. He did call me following the tragedy of Robert Kennedy, and he called me up and said, "I want you to put men on that right away," about six o'clock in the morning, "put good men on it," and so forth and so on, which we did.

M: So he does not at weird hours and frequently as the press has sometimes made it seem as if he did.

R: Well, not in my case, no. He would call me at seven o'clock in the morning, or he might call me at nine or ten o'clock in the evening or ten-thirty on some arrangements or details. Of course, he might have called

Mr. Youngblood. His staff, members of Congress, other agencies, intelligence--hours are different around the world so that somebody says it is five o'clock way out in Honolulu or in the Far East and it may be three or four in the morning here and they are not aware because my man, for example, called me and woke me up at five o'clock in the morning in Tokyo to tell me we are going to have a tough time here because they are still going at it, so this just demonstrates just how often he is awakened during the course of the night when the supplemental reports arrive.

M: One thing I wanted to be sure and ask you is to compare the task of guarding--I think you have done a pretty good job of that talking about other things. Are there any other important areas of your activity that you think should be mentioned here. I don't want to stop you, and I don't want to limit you in any way.

R: I think that President Johnson has such a complete grasp of everything and an interest in our operations. I would say he was interested because while he may not have appeared during the period of five years nonetheless it was very vividly demonstrated when he testified to the presentation of that award how he felt about the Secret Service and the respect he had for it. And he didn't have to say it.

M: No, he didn't.

R: And that is the type of man he was. It's like a family affair; you know, you call down somebody in the family but then afterward it is forgotten. I think this is what he considers part of his family; that might put it in the proper perspective.

M: I think that is what you were seeking to do.

R: That's right.

M: I am sure that he appreciates the fact that you have cooperated so well on this project. I think you will have added something for future people to examine that will be worthwhile. I certainly thank you.

R: I hope so.
