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WALLACE TERRY

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Janice Terry — 7 October 2003

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INTERVIEW I

DATE: October 8, 1999

INTERVIEWEE: WALLACE TERRY

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: LBJ Library

Tape 1 of 1

G: Mr. Terry, would you begin by giving us just a little background of how you came to work for *Time*?

T: I was a reporter for the *Washington Post* from 1960 to 1963. Right after my coverage of the March on Washington I was approached by the editors of *Time* magazine, as well as representatives from the networks, all of whom were interested in hiring a black reporter for the very first time. I chose the offer from *Time* magazine because it would make me the first black correspondent working for a news magazine as well as the first black correspondent working in Washington for the mainstream media. It was an important event for black people to make this kind of breakthrough on the color line. I was becoming a Washington correspondent, the first among black people to represent the mainstream media.

It also meant that I would have a chance to cover national news and a shot eventually at being a foreign correspondent. And none of this had really happened for black reporters. In that day and time, you could count on both hands the number of black reporters working for the mainstream media.

G: There was a significant black press and I guess that's where most of the black reporters were.

T: Absolutely. But I started my career at the *Washington Post* and that happened because I was a reporter at Brown University working for the school newspaper when Governor [Orval E.] Faubus of Arkansas came to Newport, Rhode Island, for an historic meeting with President Eisenhower in the fall of 1957. At that time, the federal courts had ordered integration of a high school in Little Rock, called Central High School, and nine black children had been selected as the first of their race as enrollees. There was a lot of tension in Little Rock, and it was generally believed that the safety of those children was in jeopardy unless the governor promised to follow the federal court orders. He would not make that declaration, and he was summoned to meet Eisenhower in Newport.

So he flew in to Newport, and there was a big press conference, and all the national press was there, and so was I; I was just a nineteen-year-old kid at the time. But after the national press left, I put on a waiter's jacket and slipped upstairs, took off the jacket when I got on Governor Faubus' floor--I was able to get through the state police lines that were protecting him. And I knocked on the door; the door was opened by Brooks Johnson [Brooks Hays?], a congressman from Arkansas who was considered a moderate and a pretty decent sort. In the black community, however, Orval Faubus was seen as the devil incarnate (Laughter); he was like the anti-Christ because, at that moment, he was the symbol against integration. Congressman Hays asked me who I was and I said, "I'm Wallace Terry, and I'm here representing the college press of the United States, and I would like to have an interview with Governor Faubus." I was doing all this on the spur of the moment, because I had not prepared any questions. If the governor came out and offered me an interview, I would have been hugely embarrassed.

Well, he shut the door and then a few minutes went by, and the door opened again and out stepped Governor Faubus. And he extended his hand, and there was nothing else for me to do but to shake it. My grandmother had raised me to be a gentleman, and you respect authority figures. Well, there was a photographer for the Associated Press who got wind of what was happening, and by that time he had made his way to that point, and he took a picture of the two of us shaking hands. The next day it was on the front page of the *New York Times*; it was the entire front section of the *New York Daily News*, it was a picture that went around the world. When the editors of the *Washington Post*--who up to that time had only hired one black in their history and he had not lasted very long--saw that picture, they called me up and asked me would I like to be a copy boy at the *Washington Post*.

Well, I was feeling pretty important at that moment, and I had spent all of six weeks as a junior reporter at the *Indianapolis News*, mostly carrying coffee to Mr. [Eugene] Pulliam, who was Dan Quayle's uncle. So I said, "I don't think I'd be interested in being a copy boy. Thank you very much, but I'm a reporter; I've been a reporter for the *Indianapolis News* for some time now." And they said, "Okay, we'll hire you as a reporter starting next summer." And that gave me my big start. But that also led to an opportunity to become the first black editor of an Ivy League newspaper, and I got that appointment in January.

G: That's a wonderful story. When did you start covering the White House?

T: When I went over to *Time* magazine in 1963, I was accepted as a general assignment reporter with no specific duties. They made it clear that I would not be channeled into covering the black community specifically, that I would be treated like any other

correspondent. But the civil rights movement was in full bloom at that moment, and I took that opportunity to carve out my own beat covering civil rights. Later I would cover labor, and along the way I became the number two or number three man on the White House behind Hugh Sidey. And that gave me an opportunity on occasion when Sidey was not there to go to the White House and follow President Johnson.

G: When did you first encounter him?

T: My first encounter with President Johnson was at the time that I graduated from Brown University in 1959. He was not vice president at that moment, but he was majority leader of the United States Senate. And he was honored at my commencement where I received my degree; he received an honorary degree in recognition of his leadership in the U.S. Senate. I didn't even shake his hand at my graduation, being very important as he was and me just an ordinary graduate. He was whisked away and went off with the trustees, and I went off with my mother.

I did not have an encounter with him again until 1963. When I came to Washington in 1960 to join the *Washington Post*, I found that there was an organization called the Capitol Press Club, which was established during the World War II years by black reporters basically working for the black press, because they had not been accepted for membership in the National Press Club. The Capitol Press Club still existed, made up of not only reporters from the black press, but other people who were interested in civil rights, including some ambassadors who cared about racial conditions in America. I joined that press club as a young reporter at the *Washington Post*, and within a year or two I'd become the vice president. And then by 1963 I was the president.

At the end of each year we would, at the Capitol Press Club, have a year-end banquet, usually in the spring, following the fiscal year pattern. And this would be a fundraiser for scholarships, to encourage young black students who were graduating from high school to pursue a college education and become journalists themselves. We would invite some prominent person to be the main speaker. I chose Terry Sanford, the governor of North Carolina, because he had been a liberal light in the South, and he was considered the most progressive of the southern governors. I also chose several people to receive our customary awards, either for achievement in journalism or achievement in the civil rights arena. And then I wanted to include Vice President Johnson. He had been entrusted with civil rights responsibilities by President Kennedy, and I thought that this was remarkable for two reasons: He had been a southerner; he had not fought hard against civil rights advances; he had generally voted with the South but he was still considered friendly, especially because of his support of blacks within the State of Texas. I had seen a glimmer that would rise into--and would blossom--into full scale support of civil rights later as he became president. And I thought that it was important to encourage the first steps that he was taking as vice president, and so I came up with the fancy idea of giving him a fancy award for his civil rights responsibilities.

I called George Reedy, who was his press secretary, a fellow that I knew--being a reporter myself I had to deal with George Reedy. I also felt close to Reedy because both of us had gone to the University of Chicago, and we were both Midwesterners, and I felt a kind of commonality of spirit. And George said, "The [Vice] President's going to have to have something a little more special than your usual award." So I made up an award called the Distinguished Service Award of the Capitol Press Club, and he told me that the Vice

President would be happy to receive it. What I didn't realize is that I had made a political blunder by inviting the Vice President to share the platform with the Governor of North Carolina, because the Governor of North Carolina had been the only southern governor to support Kennedy against Johnson in the 1960 Democratic Convention. So I had done something inadvertently that almost nobody would dare even attempt, and that is to put Vice President Johnson and Governor Sanford on the same platform.

Well, the Vice President came and he received the award from us, and it was the first time that he had been honored by a national black organization or any national organization for civil rights. It so happened that we had that banquet in May of 1963, just a day after my first child was born, and so Vice President Johnson, after his remarks following his receiving the award, announced the birth of my first son, Wallace Terry III, and offered his greetings to my wife who was in the hospital and obviously could not come to the banquet. We called my son "the freedom baby," because he was born on May 17, 1963, the anniversary of *Brown* v. *Board of Education*, the school integration case, and also the hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Not only was his birth announced by Vice President Johnson, eventually his godfather would be Martin Luther King, because earlier that year I was covering the demonstrations in Birmingham, and one day Dr. King asked me how my wife was. And I said, "Well, she's very pregnant." And he said, "Well, what are you doing down here? Why aren't you up there with her?" And I said, "This is my job, I've got to be with you, Martin." And he said, "Well, I guess I'm going to have to be the godfather of that baby whenever it comes."

G: That's remarkable.

T: We raised six hundred dollars, which was a tidy little sum back in 1963 for a[s] small [an] organization as the Capitol Press Club, to give to our scholarship winner, who was a young black girl who went to a Washington, D.C., high school. She was interested in going to Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. I got a call a few days after the banquet from George Reedy, who said, "The [Vice] President is interested in what happens to that girl. Would you come up to the capitol and see me?" So I went up to the Capitol and I walked into George's office, and he asked me how much did we raise for the scholarship? And I said, "We raised six hundred dollars." And he said, "I have a check here, and it's signed by the Vice President, and I'm going to fill in six hundred dollars to match the amount that you raised. The Vice President has one request, that you never mention where this money came from, that you do not publicize it." So I accepted the check, and I have never publicized it or mentioned it publicly until today.

Now, the next year I was not assigned to cover the campaign because I was considered close to the Vice President, who was now President following the assassination of Mr. Kennedy. I was put to work on the Goldwater campaign with another *Time* correspondent named Loye Miller. But I understood in the course of that campaign that President Johnson landed in *Air Force One* in Athens, Ohio, and he remembered that the young girl who had received his largesse had gone to the University of Ohio, and before the plane set down, he sent word that he wanted to see that young girl. And he had the girl brought to him, I'm sure to find out if his investment was working (Laughter). But it was a demonstration of his remarkable memory.

I received another offer from George Reedy when I went to his office to get that check. I was asked at the time, would I like to work for the Vice President on the--

G: Equal Employment Opportunity?

T: I think it was the Equal Employment Opportunity Council--as an assistant. Well, about the same time I was being offered this breakthrough opportunity at *Time* magazine. Although I was trained in the ministry, I've been a journalist since I had sold a penny newspaper at the age of nine that I wrote myself. And it was an opportunity--I was torn between the two. But being a journalist in those days meant you were very independent, and you were out of the picture. You stayed behind the scenes; you weren't in front of the camera like today's celebrity journalist. I had been trained at Northwestern, at Indiana, and Butler and Franklin Colleges, in the Midwest--even before I went to Brown University for my undergraduate training. And then I was trained, as I said, at the University of Chicago in the ministry, and I felt at this key moment of civil rights conflict and change, that my greatest impact might be through the media and through this opportunity where there were no blacks doing what I was doing. So I declined the offer.

A year later, however, George Reedy approached me and offered me a position as his assistant in the White House Press Office, and I accepted. I felt now I had won my spurs as a correspondent, and that I could take a leave of absence from *Time*. I didn't tell ***Time*** anything about this at all, and I was in Harlem, covering what would eventually be the cover story reporting the Harlem riots. In the newspapers that appeared one day there was mentioned in Dorothy Kilgallen's column, in Walter Winchell's column, that Wallace Terry was going to work for President Johnson. And I was stunned, because I was very young, and very new to *Time*, and I hadn't told them anything. So the chief correspondent, Dick Thurman [?], called me in the hotel room, summoned me into his office, and said, "What's this I read about in the newspaper?" I'm trembling in my shoes.

And I said, "It's an offer that was made by George Reedy." He said, "Well"--and he looked out the window--"you're gonna have to take it. And when it's over, we're gonna have to send you overseas to clean you up a bit, and then you can come back to work in the Washington Bureau."

A few weeks later, George Reedy passed me the word that he could not make the position happen. I had no idea what was going on. But what was going on, he was having difficulty with President Johnson, and he didn't want to bring this matter to his attention. In effect, George Reedy was on the way out, and Bill Moyers and George Christian and Tom Johnson were on their way in, and my great opportunity evaporated.

Several months passed by, and the annual White House Correspondents Dinner was taking place. President Johnson was making his annual visit. These banquets would be held in a major Washington hotel, and there would be several small rooms that would be sponsored by leading press institutions, hosting cocktail parties before the major sit-down dinner. Well, I gravitated to the *Washington Post* party first because I had so many old friends there. And standing at the entrance was Kay Graham, publisher of the *Washington Post*¸ and I chatted her for a few minutes, when in came President Johnson and his entourage. He would be the main guest, as he always is at these affairs. And I stood there waiting to say hello to him, and Kay Graham--and of course he embraced Kay Graham; it was Kay Graham's husband Phillip Graham who convinced President Johnson to get on the ticket with Jack Kennedy in 1960, so they were very good friends. So Kay Graham said to the President, "Mr. President, do you know this young man?" And he looked down at me and he said, "Yeah, I know him. I offered him a job, and he turned his nose up at me." I couldn't believe this, this was from a year before and it was

such a small position--I didn't even know that he knew about it, and it was almost as if he was holding it against me. But I never heard anything else like that from him, and he was always helpful and courteous and pleasant with me afterwards. But he did let me know that he wasn't too tickled with me, for that moment anyway.

G: Yes, he took it to heart when someone refused an offer.

T: Right, absolutely.

G: And of course you hadn't really refused, but that's the way he chose to see it.

T: Right. Well, that was the first offer. I had never heard any discussion about the second offer.

G: Tell us about the encounter you had with him in the White House.

T: Well, there was another encounter of some significance. I was ordained in the Disciples of Christ Church. The Disciples of Christ is an American-born denomination, founded in Kentucky back in the early 1800s. You find it mostly in the Midwest and the Southwest. President Johnson was a Disciple. When I first came to Washington as a full-time correspondent for the *Washington Post*, I wanted a church affiliation and I went immediately to National City Christian Church at Thomas Circle, which is within a couple of blocks of the *Washington Post*, and just a few more blocks away from my bachelor apartment. I encountered a minister there by the name of George Davis. And I told George that I was an ordained Disciple minister, that I had just come from our leading seminary, the Disciple's Divinity House at the University of Chicago, and that I would like to have membership there, as long as I'm in Washington. And Dr. Davis said, "Well, not right away. Why don't you come around for awhile until people get used to seeing you." Now, I understood what he meant, and that was that he had an all-white

congregation, and that he did not really want to embrace me as a member. I was furious. How could you say that to a fellow minister in a Christian church? And I was a great-great nephew of the most prominent black minister ever produced by the Disciples, and I was the first of my church--which was the leading black church of the Disciples Church--to be ordained as a son of the church. I went off and found another congregation to associate myself with.

But that story stayed with me. That pain, in a way, stayed with me. So one day after seeing one more picture of the President visiting National City and being greeted by a smiling George Davis, I decided to write a little story for *Time* magazine about the President's minister. So I researched George Davis, interviewed George Davis, and *Time* published my story. And it was not flattering at all. I received a call to come to the Executive Office Building. And one of Johnson's staff people informed me that I had brought great pain and embarrassment to the President and to his family because of that story. And I said, "Well, I'm sorry, but I'm a reporter and this man is a part of national interest--national news--and that's who he is. And that's what he's said, and that's what he's done." And I never mentioned one word in that story about how he refused to let a young black minister from a prominent seminary become a member of his church. I never told that part of the story. And there was nothing but silence. And then I departed. (Laughter).

G: Who was the staff member?

T: I keep thinking it was Watson.

G: Marvin Watson?

T: I'd almost bet on it. It wasn't Christian; I think it was Marvin.

G: The appointments secretary--

T: He was over in the EOB.

G: --at that time. That's a great story.

T: But you see, it was intimidation. It's possible that Johnson said something to someone. It would be like him to have said something, because he read everything and watched everything in the media. But I can't imagine that he would have told Watson to summon me over to the Executive Office Building to berate me. That may have been done by Watson himself, on his own.

G: He was noted for telling people to do things that he really had no intention for them to do. He was always telling Bill Moyers to fire McGeorge Bundy, for example.

(Laughter)

Let's continue with your encounter with LBJ.

T: Well, there were occasions, of course, when as the backup I would go on weekend trips with the President. I remember there was flooding, early on in his presidency, down around Ohio. And we flew in *Air Force One* down to Cincinnati. [Pierre] Salinger was acting press secretary. This was very early, soon after the assassination.

President Johnson loved to press the flesh. He loved to get into a crowd. And of course this really made the Secret Service nervous--they had lost a president. But he could not stay behind the barrier at the airport; he had to go right into the crowd. I was being pushed right along with him, right behind him, because we reporters--especially working as I did for a magazine--would always want that extra detail that the AP story or the daily reporter did not get; that's the edge that the magazine guys tried to get. And we tried to stay very close to hear something he might say or a crowd member might say.

Suddenly, I blacked out. Then when I came to very quickly, I [discovered I] had been knocked to the ground by a Secret Service agent who did not know I was a reporter, and thought that I was somehow in a threatening position. I was flattened. I mean, he gave me a good lick.

As they moved the President out of the terminal and back to the aircraft, I was up on my feet and following, and Salinger found out this had happened to me. The Secret Service agent who had hit me was near the ramp as we were boarding, and the reporters were not quite ready to get on. We were waiting to hear Salinger say who the pool reporters would be; that's the three or four reporters, usually a magazine guy or a *New York Times*--one of the prominent print publications--the two wire people, and one TV person would constitute the pool. And Salinger called my name. I was the youngest reporter out there, really junior, and I marched up to join the pool guys. He did this for the Secret Service, and he made a point of singling me out in his way; it was his way of apologizing for what had happened and for letting the Secret Service agent [know], who now had turned beet red, and all the way back he kept hanging around me, wanting to find out if I would like another drink or if I would like something or other, which was not his responsibility. He was not one of the Air Force enlisted men doing the serving.

What I do recall is Johnson's constant concern, in those quiet moments when he would sit with us in helicopters or on the aircraft, about Vietnam, and just asking us what we thought of Vietnam, whether we'd been there or not.

I also remember that if you were eating and he was sitting next to you, he'd just start eating off your plate. (Laughter). I had a friend named Valen Graham [?] who was working for *Time*¸ and he was just waiting to get to his dessert--which was cherry pie--

and he was sitting next to the President, and the President just went after his cherry pie, and ate all the cherry pie. And how do you tell the President of the United States, "You can't have my cherry pie"? But that was Lyndon.

G: He made a practice of that. I think my favorite one is, he ate the bacon from the serving tray of the wife of the Australian prime minister aboard *Air Force One*; he just reached right across and got it. (Laughter)

T: In 1967 *Time* Magazine sent me to Vietnam to help prepare a cover story on the Negro soldier, as we called [them] then. When I came back I made contact with a neighbor of mine, Thurgood Marshall, who was Solicitor General. It was widely believed that he was in that position so he could be "cleaned up" for a spot on the Supreme Court. And if he was appointed to the Supreme Court, blacks would regard that as their most significant appointment in the history of America, more important than Johnson's appointment of Bob Weaver as the first black member of the cabinet or Andrew Brimmer as the first black member of the Federal Reserve Board. This would be the Supreme Court. And Thurgood Marshall, perhaps after Martin Luther King, was regarded as the most important black leader in America, because he had headed the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and had argued a couple of dozen cases successfully before the Supreme Court.

I had remembered that Marshall, years before, had gone to Korea after Harry Truman had ordered the armed forces integrated in 1948, to see how well that integration had worked. So I wanted to tell Marshall that it was really working in Vietnam. And he said, "You know, the President needs to hear that story, because he doesn't hear anything good much about Vietnam."

So I was summoned to the White House to give the President a private briefing on what I had seen in Vietnam and how the armed forces were fully integrated and that blacks were serving in a distinguished capacity--bravely and heroically--and that they were demonstrating their pride and their patriotism. And I told him all that I'd seen. And afterwards, he said he wanted to do *me* a favor, and he gave me all the background of the announcement that he was planning for the following Monday, and it was Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court. So he had given me what was up to that time the biggest scoop of my life. And unfortunately it did not appear in *Time* after I wrote it; it appeared in *Newsweek*. One of Johnson's aides passed the notes of our meeting off to *Newsweek*, and my editors decided not to run the scoop but *Newsweek* had no compunctions; they ran it.

G: Do you know who the aide was?

T: Sure, it was Tom Johnson, who was sitting in the meeting with the two of us.

G: How did he react--?

T: Well, he was very happy to hear this report for me; it boosted his morale. And at that point it was true that not only were the forces integrated, not only were blacks serving as officers over everybody, black or white, but most of the troops were supporting the President's policy. Most of the troops believed and felt very deeply and strongly that he was following the right course in stemming communist aggression, and they felt their efforts and their sacrifice was worth it. They mostly disagreed with the black leaders in the States who were critical of Johnson by that time, which included Dr. King. Not all black leaders, just some. As a matter of fact, many more still supported Johnson. Many black leaders believed that this was no time to criticize Johnson's foreign policy when he

was such a supporter for civil rights. He undoubtedly did more for civil rights than any president since Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln is credited with the emancipation which was produced by the war, so I would have to say if you talk about the greatest *civil* rights president, it would Lyndon Johnson. [If] you say Lincoln's our greatest president because he held the union together, that's something else again.

I received an offer to go back to Vietnam as a regular war correspondent for a tour that would last me two years, and I intended only one year. And I'll tell you what happened. Johnson asked me over to the White House again when he heard I was leaving. I went in to tell him goodbye, and he said, "I'm going to send a message over to [Ambassador Ellsworth] Bunker and tell him to look out for you. And I want you to be in the White House with me when you come back."

Now, a year later everything had changed: Dr. King was gone, Bobby Kennedy was gone, the President had decided not to run, and Hubert Humphrey, whom I loved dearly, had lost the election. So I decided I'd rather be in Vietnam--(Laughter)--than in America, and I stayed another year, and then I decided to come home because I couldn't endanger my life any longer at the risk of my three children losing their father.

G: So did you ever get to see him again after that?

T: I didn't see him again.

G: Didn't see him in retirement?

T: I didn't see him in retirement. And I've always regretted that. But I was like a lot of other veterans who came home; confused about where I fit in, and trying to find myself. I came back to a country that was turning its face against Vietnam, and a president who was anathema to everything that I had believed in. I was a Democrat; I was a Johnson-

Humphrey Democrat. And now the country was in the hands of Richard Nixon. All I could think about was getting a book together about the black soldier and then getting back overseas, out of the United States as fast as possible and going on with the career of a foreign correspondent.

But you never know what's going to happen. I spent a year at Harvard; I was studying international relations, preparing for this great life as a foreign correspondent in other parts of the world. I came back to the Washington bureau, awaiting this new assignment, and I had finished a manuscript about the black experience in Vietnam; an expansion of what I had talked to the President about. But I couldn't get it published the way I wanted it. And the next thing I knew I was on my way to Europe as an advisor to the United States Air Force on race relations, working directly for General David Jones as a special assistant; he was the Commander-in-Chief of the United States Air Force, Europe. And when I came back and went to work for the marine corps through Jay Walter Thompson [?] as a producer and advisor on minority recruitment films about minorities and so forth.

Then I turned to teaching and to television, and went along expanding my experiences first as a teacher, then as a radio commentator, which I did for ten years until it was time to help start *USA Today*, and become its op-ed page editor.

And then off to write *Bloods*, which was the story about black soldiers that was ultimately published, years after President Johnson had died. It was recognized as an important addition to the Vietnam literature and was published in several languages overseas, and became a television documentary, a Hollywood movie, a radio documentary, and hailed by *Parade* magazine as the best book written on the war. But

more importantly, it's used in colleges today as part of black studies, Vietnam studies, American studies, and it's inspired me to continue to write about Vietnam veterans and to continue to care about them.

G: Let me ask you this: it's a little trite but I don't know of another way to put it. What would you do differently if you had started writing *Bloods* today?

T: I would have written about the Civil War instead of Vietnam.

(Laughter)

T: I wouldn't have had so much trouble.

G: All right. That's not what I thought I was going to get.

T: But you know, we're growing up in this country. We're beginning to look at Vietnam. And Vietnam books are being read, and I think they will be increasingly read down through the years, just as Civil War books are still very, very popular. Right now we're going through a boom in World War II books, led by Stephen Ambrose's great contributions. And I'm thinking in another three or four years we'll see the same thing happen with Vietnam studies.

G: It took almost a hundred years for the great civil war books to come out--Bruce Catton and Allan Nevins.

T: Well, I don't want to wait that long.

(Laughter)

End of Interview I