INTERVIEW WITH

John A. Bird

by

John E. Wickman
Director

on

August 18, 1972

for

Dwight D. Eisenhower Library

OH-318; Bird, John A.
Open

Gift of Personal Statement

John A. Bird

to the

Dwight D. Eisenhower Library

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This is an interview with John Bird on August 18, 1972. The interviewer is Dr. John Wickman of the Eisenhower Library and the interview is being held in Mr. Bird's office.

DR. WICKMAN: Why don't we start with just how you wound up working with Eisenhower in the first place.

MR. BIRD: Well, actually that goes back considerably because I worked with Milton in the early 1940s. Milton and I were, both were, graduated from Kansas State College. I came to Washington in 1933, and wound up in the Department of Agriculture as assistant chief of the press section of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. Milton was then Director of Information of the Department and along the line of our work we became acquainted. Later, in 1940, while he was Land Use Coordinator he offered me a job as principal writer in his office. So I worked with Milton very closely writing a lot of reports for Congress and editing studies on upstream flood control, soil conservation and similar things.

Then, several weeks after Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt asked him to make an urgent study of the government's informational activities for the war effort -- and Milton drafted me to help him. This study recommended the establishment of an Office of War Information and outlined the

basic plans for it. We often worked into the night on the study and after one late session at Milton's home in Falls Church, Virginia, I first met Ike, who was temporarily living there. Ike hadn't been a brigadier general very long and I remembered that only a couple of years before when he was still a colonel or lieutenant colonel, Milton had considerably more influence in Washington than he had, and would do favors for him.

Both Milton and I expected to go into the Office of War Information as soon as it was set up. Instead he was suddenly harpooned into organizing the War Relocation Authority to move Japanese-Americans from the West Coast. I agreed to go along as his director of information but only for the organization phase. I didn't like the idea of relocating the Japanese who were U. S. citizens and I don't think he did either, but it was going to be done in any case. After the WRA was organized and settled down by midsummer, I resigned and joined the staff of Country Gentleman magazine as an associate editor. During the following years I had casual contact with Milton, and when he was President of Kansas State University I would drop in and visit with him whenever I was

out that way. When Ike was nominated for the Presidency, Milton called, called up my boss Robert H. Reed, the editor of Country Gentleman. The call came in as we were having a big staff conference in the boss' office, and Milton asked if he could borrow me to help to write the farm speech for the General. This was to be his first big campaign speech in Kasson, Minnesota. Bob Reed, who also knew Milton and had met the General, was at his desk, and he said, "Why yes of course." Then he added, "Look, John is right here. Maybe I'd better ask him." So he asked me in front of the whole damn staff. I said, "There's just one little drawback--I'm a Democrat." I said, "Of course, I like Ike personally and want him to win but I'm a Democrat." Milton and Bob allowed that it wouldn't make too much difference; so the next thing I found myself on a plane going out to Denver. This was in August when Ike's people were getting the campaign figured out. I worked hard on that farm speech. Of course I had done a lot of ghost-writing, but I had never done any political speech writing like that before. It was like working with fifty people looking over your shoulder. This was a fairly hot issue at that time--what was going to happen

to the farm programs. The key point of the speech was that Ike wasn't going to destroy the farm program. Of course the fact was that the General knew very little about modern agriculture and the agricultural programs, but Milton knew a lot about farm policies and programs because he had had his hand in these more or less from their inception. And so Milton and I worked out the main strategy and thrust of the speech.

WICKMAN: In the Brown Palace [Hotel]?

BIRD: In the Brown Palace. It was done in a hotel bedroom in the Brown Palace. I finished it in the Commodore [Hotel] in New York, but most of it was done out there. There were some good people like Clifford Hope, who was a Kansas Congressman I'd known over the years as a very fine man, and [Senator] Frank Carlson. They were real solid guys, and most helpful.

WICKMAN: So in that particular context, you got together a speech with these various advisors and people interested in the campaign and then did you submit the draft to the General?

BIRD: No. I talked it over with Milton in the hotel room there at the Brown Palace, and he helped me decide on the points that we thought we wanted--to defuse this issue of parity and all that sort of thing. And then I made an outline, a detailed outline. For some reason or other the General asked me to come out on a Sunday morning to go over this outline; this was about the only time he had for a long discussion. Gabe Hauge and Stanley High were also there and we started over the outline but never finished. I remember this very well because we were right in the middle of it when Mamie came down and said, "Ike, it's time to go to Church." And he said, "Well, I think maybe I had better skip. We have this important--." And she said, "Well, if that's the way you feel about it!" (This was out at the Doud home.) She flipped around and started up the stairs. And Ike gave us a kind of an agonized look, and he got up and said, "Well, that's all, boys." Later, of course, he did go over the outline and text, not once but several times.

WICKMAN: Very good. Well, how long were you out in Denver on this exercise, a week or a couple days?

BIRD: I stayed until the campaign headquarters moved to New York. Then, I stayed on at the Commodore, working on whistle stop speeches for the campaign train. Also Country Gentleman asked each presidential candidate to write an article presenting his stand on the farm issues. I remember that very well because I wrote General Eisenhower's. I went over the draft with him on the campaign plane--I've forgotten where we were going--and he had this military idea that he shouldn't use I in a written statement. He said, "I never use the perpendicular pronoun." This threw me, because how can you write an article about how you stand on these things without saying "I"? He couldn't very well use the royal "we" or give his views in third person. Finally I said, "Look, this has got to be first person, or it just can't be done." And I added, "If I can't deliver this article, I'll have to leave this campaign right now because I promised Country Gentleman they would have the article this week." Finally, very reluctantly, he came around to the use of the first person singular. It was one of those little things apparently from the military. I remember this because of the contrast later on after he was in the White House. Then he was more relaxed about this.

WICKMAN: He had taken command.

BIRD: I stayed with the campaign until the time of the Nixon secret fund business, then I left the campaign at Cleveland and went back to Country Gentleman. Another little anecdote on this business of Kasson farm speech. Of course we got the thing written; he cleared it; everybody and his brother looked at it; and we had it timed out for length. Then on the plane into Kasson the radio-TV guy, I've forgotten who he was, was looking at the text, and he rushed to the General and said, "This is going to run too long; you're going to run over. It's got to be cut." Ike was a little bit annoyed about this, and he said, "Oh, we'll cut it." So I sat down with him and we went through it--the version in the large type--with a red pencil. Of course when you're cutting a speech the easiest things to cut--you don't want to cut the key points, you don't want to cut the basic information--are the anecdotes and the color. The text was supposed to be cut two minutes I think. I was mad because I knew it had been timed carefully and Ike did talk rather fast. By gosh, when he gave the speech it ran two minutes short.

WICKMAN: So that was the campaign experience. Did you see the

General when he was in the White House?

BIRD: Yes, I saw him a couple of times. In 1953 I was asked to write a speech that he was going to give to the Future Farmers somewhere, the farm youth, in mid-October.

WICKMAN: Probably in Chicago or Kansas City, one or the other.

BIRD: Yes, I think it was Kansas City. I wrote that one. I came down to Washington and, let's see, I've forgotten, I think it was Gabe Hauge or Bryce Harlow told me that all the research had been done. All I had to do was just put it together in the right length and style. Well, only about half of the research had been done. So I had to pull a lot of new information together, and I worked most of the night at the Statler Hotel on the darned thing. I finally finished a draft but I wasn't very proud of it because it was done under pressure. Later I was on an agricultural trade mission. Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Benson asked me to go along to the Mediterranean area and southern Europe. The members of the mission met with the President before we left, and we

weren't quite sure what our approach was to be as we went around to all these countries. So we thought we ought to have a letter from the President. (And he'd made a nice little statement about the trade between nations.) We talked to him about that, and we drafted a letter for him--a simple, very pleasant letter about trade and so forth. This letter with the magical name, Dwight D. Eisenhower, on the bottom turned out to be the most useful document we had. We had hundreds of copies made, and we sowed them along the way. After that I didn't have much contact with him until he left the White House.

WICKMAN: When was the next time you saw him or worked with him? After the Presidency was over?

BIRD: It was after the Presidency was over. The next was after Ben Hibbs left the Saturday Evening Post, and I took over to handle the articles that Ike was going to write for the Post.

WICKMAN: That would be in '61? Well, we can check it because I've got the dates. We had to check the dates with Ben you know.

BIRD: I started in early '63. Ben did several in 1961 and '62, and very nice, too. Then Ben left the Post and he suggested to the editor that I take over. So I got in touch with the General and had a meeting with him in Gettysburg to talk over the situation, the ideas and what not. I remember that at the first meeting he didn't really have any specific ideas; we went over a lot of different things. Also, I had to sell him on the idea of using a tape recorder.

WICKMAN: This is one thing I wanted to ask you about.

BIRD: I had taken a tape recorder along on that trip, but he indicated that he didn't want me to use it that time. So we talked over a lot of things, and he spoke so darned fast that I couldn't keep up in my notes. So afterwards I went out feeling that I had so much in my head that if I just shook it everything would slip away. I needed to stop someplace to get this down; so I stopped at a motel outside of Gettysburg. I said to the manager, "I'd just like to have a room for an hour or so; I want to do some work." And he was very suspicious of that.

WICKMAN: Small town, you know.

BIRD: Small town. Well, finally, I did persuade him that I was just going to do some tape recording, that I wasn't going to bring a bunch of women in there or take dope. So then I went back over the whole session and made a tape of Ike's remarks, which was very helpful. Then I didn't have to bother to remember it all. Then I surely realize that if I was going to ghost-write articles for the General, I would have to persuade him to let me use a tape recorder. As it turned out the first article the General wanted to write had to do with government spending; he was real hot on that subject. By this time the Eisenhowers were in Palm Desert, so I did some research, made an outline, and flew out there in March to meet with Ike. I took along a tape recorder on our first appointment, and I said, "General, this is going to be a very complicated subject. I think it would be best if we recorded it." And he agreed and we started.

WICKMAN: Did he stick pretty close to the outline?

BIRD: He talked from the outline, but he also wandered all over the lot. That was part of the problem you see--he would

get interested in a conversation and he'd go off in various things. I needed an outline to bring him back to the subject. But this worked fine.

WICKMAN: Well, this is one reason that the tapes are so interesting you see because they are the only tape recordings that we have of this kind of thing.

BIRD: Really!

WICKMAN: Everybody else worked with notes because he preferred to do it that way. So all through there's just nobody in there with a tape recorder, ever, not even the White House or any place else.

BIRD: Imagine that!

WICKMAN: We have tapes of his voice; we have tapes of other interviews for other purposes. And I only have these three tapes of his actually doing this kind of thing, working on an outline for something that's going to become an article.

BIRD: Well, there are more tapes than that. There should be about five or six tapes.

WICKMAN: What size reel were you using? What kind of recorder, do you remember?

BIRD: I was using several different kinds.

WICKMAN: We have three tapes. We converted those big seven inch reels because that's the way we store it.

BIRD: I had a small portable Grundig. And then I used a big Wollensak, and toward the last I used a little Sony. I would convert the small tape to larger reels for the Wollensak for easy transcribing. But he always called it "your damned machine" or "your God-damned machine." I'd come in and he'd say, "Well, get your God-damned machine out, and let's go to work."

WICKMAN: How many sessions did you have with him? I can't reconstruct this from the tapes.

BIRD: Well, I'd have to reconstruct them from my correspondence and schedules and notes. But I had, oh, about six sessions at least.

WICKMAN: This is another technical problem that we have. At Gettysburg we have appointment schedules that are very much

like they were in the White House; so it's easy. But out on the desert, when you were out there, they very frequently did not keep the same kind of appointment records. So I'm not sure whether I've got it all or not.

BIRD: I was out to Palm Desert [California] three times. The first was in March of '63 and again in April on the article, "Spending Into Trouble", then in February of '64 to tape material for "Why I Am A Republican."

WICKMAN: Well, there were three articles I think in that series.

BIRD: Out there we would have a taping session; sometimes we would have a couple of taping sessions. I would transcribe the stuff right there and draft the articles.

WICKMAN: Did you work over at Jacqueline Cochran's ranch or was it close?

BIRD: No, no, I worked at the motel; I worked at the Indian Wells Country Club on the first article.

WICKMAN: I mean interviewing him.

BIRD: Oh, at his house.

WICKMAN: At the house. The El Dorado.

BIRD: Yes. The first time I was out there I stayed at Indian Wells. Something had gone wrong with my recorder on the way out; so I rented a tape recorder over in Indio. And I took it over to the Eisenhower home for the interview but I'd forgotten this kind had to heat up. Ike and I started out to have an hour or so session, but he got very interested and we went all afternoon. It was a real long session. When I got back to the motel, I started the recorder on play-back but there didn't seem to be anything on it. And I sat there getting ready to jump out the window or something, and it went on for about four minutes without a sound and then all of a sudden--

WICKMAN: It had heated up, oh, dear. That's a marvelous story because this is the bane of everybody in oral history programs--either you forget to turn it on or you forget to put the tape in or the thing doesn't work.

BIRD: I'd had good luck before but this damned thing. . ..

WICKMAN: It's marvelous.

BIRD: Another anecdote has to do with Mamie's uncle, I think it was Boone--

WICKMAN: Joel Carlson.

BIRD: Joel Carlson.

WICKMAN: From Boone, Iowa.

BIRD: Boone, Iowa. He was around there. And for some reason or other he got the idea that I was selling tape recorders.

WICKMAN: Oh.

BIRD: When I'd come in there carrying--

WICKMAN: And he'd wander in.

BIRD: He'd wander in. Ike and I just sat down at that big table by the window.

WICKMAN: And a swimming pool, right by the swimming pool.

BIRD: Yes and get going. And another thing, out there, Ike would always, when we finished up, ask me if I wanted a drink or something like that--usually it was a coke. And then he'd

always walk out to the car with me for some reason or other I couldn't quite figure out.

WICKMAN: Well, he felt very comfortable with you. I worked with him for three years, the last three years of his life. When I took over at the Library, I found that this was just something that happened--that as he got to know a person better why gradually, bit by bit, the next thing you knew you were almost one of the family and that's all there was to it. Since you worked with him in several different periods in his life, I'm kind of interested in the question of change. Obviously during the campaign he's very busy and he's harassed and so on; but, did you notice any difference in him between the campaign and the post-Presidency? Was he easier to work with in the post-Presidency?

BIRD: Oh, he was much easier to work with in the post-Presidential years. During the campaign he was a bit tied up--up at five o'clock or six o'clock in the morning to start making speeches and what not. And incidentally these pre-planned whistle stop speech texts didn't work worth a damn.

WICKMAN: Why was that?

BIRD: He was best if he just went out and spoke off the cuff. After he saw the crowd, he'd see something to talk about and they would respond to him. He eventually developed little set speeches of his own that worked better than those we had written. We had tried to make these something that would identify with every place but they didn't get across the real Ike. In other words, the prepared speeches were too canned.

WICKMAN: Did you hear him giving these whistle stop speeches?

BIRD: Yes. I would get off the train and out in the crowd and get reactions.

WICKMAN: I couldn't get that straight from what you said before, whether you had written the speeches and then gave them to him, and they went off down the track, or you were right along there all the time?

BIRD: No, I was on the campaign train, but finally left because I felt I wasn't contributing anything. His whistle stop speeches were better if he just gave them off the cuff with a few ideas contributed from us. They didn't need to be all written out. So I thought I was just spinning my wheels.

WICKMAN: Well since you were with them that long, what were some of the problems in the way the campaign worked, that is the way the staff worked? Did everything work pretty well, pretty slick?

BIRD: I thought that the campaign was quite well organized. I think Ike always had good staff work around him. I don't know that I'm a particularly good judge and, sure, there were little slip-ups, but, gee, I was amazed at how smoothly the campaign ran. Of course the fact remains that these are brutal affairs. Everything was scheduled by minutes--at such and such a place the wife of the county chairman was going to present Mamie with some flowers and so-and-so was going to be in the boll weevil car. The whole thing was quite a well organized traveling circus.

WICKMAN: That's the best way to describe it; that's what they are.

[Interruption]

WICKMAN: I've got biographical information on you, but I thought maybe we might pick up something that isn't in the record. Where and when were you born?

BIRD: I was born in Hays, Kansas on February 14, 1910. My father at that time was a professor at Ft. Hays [Ft. Hays Kansas State College]. He later went into the newspaper business and then the land business and farming business.

WICKMAN: All around Hays?

BIRD: Yes. My father developed one of the first large scale farms in the country, mechanized large scale farms. I grew up in the country because he liked the idea and of living on a farm. We had a farm near town; it was an operating farm, and we milked cows, raised pigs and had a poultry flock. It was quite a life. It's one of the reasons that I have a certain empathy with the sort of atmosphere in which the Eisenhowers grew up. It was very similar. My mother was a liberated woman long before there were such because she finished her college education while her children were still young, and eventually ran the newspaper. She was a good business woman. She also helped run the home farm, and she loved that farm. Then later on my father developed this large scale farming operation--more than sixty thousand acres. And he also built a housing development. He was quite an operator. We moved to town, oh, when I was about sixteen or thereabouts. Then I went on to Kansas State

College, majoring in journalism. But there were oh, some parallels in that one of my mother's best friends was Annie Hopkins who was a high school teacher, taught Latin and English. She then taught in Abilene, Kansas, which is about a hundred and fifty miles down the road from Hays. She would come out to our farm in the summer, and she tutored me in Latin. She would tell me about some of her bright students, and she was very fond of Milton Eisenhower. That's when I first heard of the Eisenhowers, when she said she had this very bright boy. I don't recall her ever mentioning Ike. He would have been farther along.

WICKMAN: Older, yes.

BIRD: But I remember her mentioning Milton, and this family of very bright boys in Abilene. Later, she taught in Dickinson County High School, a consolidated school at Chapman. My wife, Katherine Taylor, went to school to her, and was not one of her favorites. Annie would go out to the Taylor farm--I remember she mentioned going out to the Taylor farm and that they had a tennis court out there. I didn't know any Taylors until I went to Kansas State where one of the nice little girls

I met was Katherine Taylor. We got married in 1930 and have been married all these years.

WICKMAN: From Kansas State your first job was where then?

BIRD: I started free lance writing when I was in college for some of the newspapers and farm magazines. Then I worked for my father and his company for a short time, until the drought and the depression hit. My father had always been interested in politics and encouraged me to take part in 1932 campaign to learn something about the political process. It so happened that a gal from our town was running for Congress, Kathryn McCarthy from Hays. It didn't seem that she had a chance in the world but campaigning for her would be good experience. So I volunteered to work for her and write some of her publicity material, handle her advertising and stuff like that. And doggoned if she didn't win the primary, and she won the general election. So I came to Washington as her secretary--and I hated it. I wasn't long out of college and was full of ideals.

WICKMAN: Well did you come to Washington as her literal secretary?

BIRD: Well, it would be called administrative assistant or something now, but in those days it was called secretary. I more or less ran the office and helped the Congresswoman write speeches and wrote a column for the papers back home. I remember I helped handle the patronage and projects such as trying to get some CCC camps in the district and things like that. But she really went back on all of her campaign promises. She had won largely on the nepotism issue. Her opponent, Congressman [Charles Isaac] Sparks, had put all of his family on the payroll, and you can imagine the response at that time when jobs were scarce. And so the first thing Kathryn McCarthy did when she got elected was put her husband on the payroll and her sister in charge of one of the big projects in Kansas. She put many of her relatives on the payroll, and I was really disgusted with her. And so I left within a year and got a job at the Department of Agriculture. Meanwhile I had been writing for Country Gentleman magazine, Successful Farming, Baltimore Sun and various others. I was more interested in writing than anything else. And of course my ambition was to write for the Saturday Evening Post. I sold my first article to the Post, I think in 1943, and then I did wind up on the staff of the Post in 1955.

WICKMAN: That's a very interesting transition from agriculture to the Post.

BIRD: Well, it was rather an evolution. I started writing for magazines when I was in college. At first I wrote largely about agricultural subjects because of my farm background. And then I went on human interest and politics and conservation and all sorts of things.

WICKMAN: And that's where you ran into Ben Hibbs then?

BIRD: Yes.

WICKMAN: Well, I have a couple of other questions in regard to General Eisenhower. I'm just curious, because of these several associations you had with him about any kind of general impressions that you may have had of him aside from the usual thing that we hear.

BIRD: Well, of course, you know he was very charming but he was also very businesslike. I mean he didn't waste any time. Oh, there was little amount of preliminary visiting and then he would get right down to business on the subject at hand. He was very considerate in many ways although he took a lot

of things for granted because he was accustomed to a staff doing things for him. I think the hairiest experience I had in working with him was when Kennedy was assassinated, and the Post asked me, "Can you get General Eisenhower to write something on the Presidential succession or something like that." The General was in New York, the United Nations on that day. I managed to reach Bob [General Robert] Schulz [Eisenhower's Aide de Camp] and he said, "I don't think there's a chance, but I'll try. We're going to Washington in the morning; I'll call you in the morning." I had a terrible deadline--the article, if any, had to be done over the weekend. So about seven thirty in the morning Schulz called me and said, "The General will be in Gettysburg at three o'clock this afternoon; he will meet you there. He just doesn't see what can be done, but he's willing to talk to you about it." Of course Ike was in Washington to see President Johnson. And so I got all my stuff together and tore up to Gettysburg and figured up some questions; I think I had about seven in an outline. Ike had planned to come to Gettysburg by helicopter but there was a tremendous rain - almost a cloudburst. Three o'clock came and no Ike; four, I

think about four-thirty he walked in; he had driven up. He was shaking the rain off his hat; it was raining so hard that he had gotten wet just coming from the car. He said, "John, I don't see what you're going to write about, and secondly I don't see how you've got time to do it." And I said, "Well, General, would you mind looking at these questions in this outline and tell me what you think? As far as the time, I can work pretty fast if I have to." So he went over them, and he got interested. Finally he said, "Well, get your damned machine out and we'll take a crack at it." And so I got my machine out and put it on the desk; he started talking. He had a habit of taking pencils and playing with them, and I noticed these were making a cracking noise next to the microphone. Then, darn it, I finally had to ask him to quit playing with the pencils because they were would knock out part of the recording. He went on at considerable length discussing the presidential succession. I think we recorded for, oh, about an hour and a half; I think it was after six o'clock and you know Mamie was beginning to call for him. Let's see, I think his son John was there too.

WICKMAN: John was probably still there.

BIRD: Yes, John was there; John was there through part of the interview. When the General got through recording, he said, "I just don't see how you are going to get this transcribed and written, but I have to go to Washington tomorrow afternoon." Anyway, I worked all night transcribing the tape and drafting the article. My wife was with me, and she kept getting coffee for me. About ten o'clock in the morning Ike called me and he said, "When is that copy coming over? I have to go to Washington." So I said, "Well, I've got part of it done, and I'll send Katherine over with it." I was at the motel right across the street; so I sent my wife, Katherine, running these pages over for the story as I kept on writing. She came back and told me that he said the text was fine, so far, except for an unclear phrase in first paragraph and I fixed that. So I finished the first draft by noon but he had seen the copy in pieces, not as whole. So he said, "Come out to the farm and I'll go over it before I leave." Let's see, Oswald was shot that morning while we were working on that article.

WICKMAN: Yes.

BIRD: Katherine was in the General's office -- taking copy to him -- when they got the news of Oswald being shot. She came back and told me that the General had said, "Good God, what's going to happen next?"

WICKMAN: This was all at the time of the assassination then?

BIRD: Yes.

WICKMAN: Your people at the Post wanted this then when they knew that Kennedy was assassinated?

BIRD: Oh yes. I'd better clear up the sequence. Late in the afternoon of the Friday when Kennedy was assassinated, the Post called and asked me, "Can you get the General to write an article dealing with the presidential succession?" The deadline was Monday. I tape-recorded Ike's comments in Gettysburg on Saturday, worked that night on the text and sent a draft of the article, piece by piece, over to him on Sunday morning. Then on early Sunday afternoon I took the whole manuscript out to the Eisenhower farm and Ike and I sat on the glassed-in porch at the back and went over the copy. He okayed it with a few pencil-ed-in changes but it was agreed that John Eisenhower would go

over the copy again if it had to be cut or changed in any way. So it was left that way.

WICKMAN: I see.

BIRD: And so I left with the marked-up copy in my hand. Katherine was waiting in the car and we drove out, it was a cold day I remember, to the farm gate. Meanwhile because of the assassination the authorities had put all this security on the place, state troopers and so forth. I was very amused because there was General Schulz out at the gate and the state troopers didn't know him and wouldn't let him in. He had come to join to go to Washington with the Eisenhowers. He had his suitcase and was standing there in the cold. He said, "Will you please tell them who I am?" This was very amusing because of course my only identification was that I was coming from the Eisenhower house.

WICKMAN: You were over there. That was pretty good. Well, then you took the copy back, and I presume it went as done. Didn't have to cut it or anything.

BIRD: We did have to do something; it had to be cut a bit. I remember we had to check something with John, but it was no problem. So this was the way that assignment worked out. I remember also that well, this really had nothing to do with Ike, but that motel closed its switchboard down at night -- no calls in or out -- and that caused me a lot of trouble.

WICKMAN: That's the Criterion Motel, right across the street from the office.

BIRD: They closed their switchboard down at ten o'clock at night.

WICKMAN: They still do and they drive you batty.

BIRD: We had a Monday deadline on that copy, so the Post flew a man out who picked up the manuscript and took it back.

WICKMAN: So you couldn't call out.

BIRD: The Post had been trying to get hold of me to tell me about arrangements and find out how the article was going.

WICKMAN: And they couldn't call in.

BIRD: And I couldn't get hold of them regarding what was happening.

WICKMAN: Yes.

BIRD: So I finally wound up at three o'clock in the morning, on a cold morning, out in a pay station calling into New York.

WICKMAN: Right down by the restaurant probably.

BIRD: Before this I had called the manager of the motel and said, "This is an emergency call." He was a retired Army colonel, and he would have nothing to do with it--"The switchboard is closed and you're out of luck."

WICKMAN: You know my staff will get a kick out of this because this same thing has happened to me. I too stood out there, it wasn't raining, in the cold one day waiting for a young lady to get off the phone, the pay phone, so I could use it in the middle of the night because the switchboard had shut down. The handiest place to stay but it would drive you crazy.

BIRD: There was a little more to it, I remember. I tried to impress the retired colonel by saying, "This is something for General Eisenhower." And he said, "I don't give a God-damn who it's for." So I never stayed there again.

WICKMAN: In the articles that you did with General Eisenhower, were there usually many drafts or just go pretty quick?

BIRD: No, this was one thing that amazed me because I understand when Ike was in the White House his speeches would go through draft after draft after draft. I had great luck because on most of these there was one draft, and I went over it with him and he penciled in any minor changes. If a fairly extensive correction was needed, we'd talk it over and I'd go out and write a new paragraph. And that was it; we didn't have any problem at all. Another little anecdote. He was a great clean desk man. You went there and his desk was always clean--nothing but a pencil on it or some little thing on the top. One time, and this was at Gettysburg, he had over stayed and he was in a hurry, and we had a lot of papers out. I was going to go out with him, and he got up and opened his desk drawer and swept the whole mass of papers into it. I could see that there

already were all kinds of papers in there. It looked quite like my desk drawer. And this was a nice human touch. Also I think I told you about him suggesting that I take Rusty out to lunch, didn't I?

WICKMAN: No.

BIRD: Well this was out at Palm Desert. I think we had the manuscript almost finished, but I was checking something on it. He said, "John, you've been working awful hard; you ought to take a little time off and have some fun. Why don't you take Rusty out to lunch? Why don't you go up to the Tyrol, up in the mountains? It's beautiful. You can get lunch there, a very good lunch there for, oh, twelve or thirteen dollars." And I didn't know if he was serious or kidding, see. My expense account would have stood it, but I sure knew that a twenty-six dollar lunch for two would have raised eyebrows. Anyway it didn't work out that time; I've forgotten why. Another time he was using the price of suits as a comparison. He said, "Now, one guy might--it all depends on your taste--buy three hundred dollar suits and maybe you buy only two hundred dollar suits." And I said, "General, I think more than taste is involved in my case, such as economics."

WICKMAN: The thought I had before when we were talking about your biography was that it always amazes me the number of Kansans he wound up with. It's a fantastic thing.

BIRD: Well Kansans tend to--

WICKMAN: --hang together. Well, it's a small state.

BIRD: In a small population state everybody knows everybody.

WICKMAN: When was the last time you saw the General then? On the last article?

BIRD: No. Actually what happened was that the last time I worked with him on an article was in late '64. Originally we were going to do an article on politics right after the Republican convention. So I was at the Republican convention in San Francisco in '64. When I first saw Ike there he was at a cocktail party across from his suite at the St. Francis hotel, and I remember I got taken completely by an unpleasant surprise because I hadn't seen the current issue of the Post. I had been out in South Dakota working on a story. That issue of the Post carried an anti-Goldwater editorial which, among other things, took a slap at Ike. It criticized his lack of

decisiveness regarding potential candidates.

WICKMAN: Yes. I remember that now.

BIRD: I hadn't seen this editorial. At that time the Post was in somewhat of a scramble. You have to realize that the magazine had gotten pretty far away from the smooth organization of Ben Hibbs days, and they hadn't forewarned me about this unfavorable mention of General Eisenhower. Anyway, when I saw Ike at the St. Francis, he waved and I walked up to him and shook his hand. He still had a drink in his hand. His face was stern and he said, "John, the moment of truth has come" or "This is the moment of truth. Are we going to work as a team or aren't we?" And I didn't know what he was talking about. He said, "All our plans are off." I said, "General, I just, I don't know what you mean. What's the problem?" He said, "Well, it's that editorial in the Post." And I said, "I haven't seen it. I don't know anything about it." Then he calmed down, and he said, "Well, I always had a special place for the Post, and I've always felt that I was a member of the team; that we were all like a member of the family. I won't hold it against you. Why don't you come to breakfast tomorrow

morning, seven o'clock in my suite, and we can talk about a possible article. But," he said, "I want you to send this message to the man who wrote that editorial: I think he's a God damned nincompoop!" Then he added, "That writer simply picked up a lot of gossip. It was inaccurate. At least he could have called me and checked the facts. I want to be sure this gets to him."

WICKMAN: Well, did you go to breakfast the next day?

BIRD: I went to breakfast the next day in this huge suite. Milton was there, and John was there, and Mamie was around in one of her beautiful robes, and she was worrying about John because he had flown out in his own plane. I remember that she asked John, "How are you going to go back?" He said, "I'm going to fly back." She said, "Well, promise me you won't fly over any mountains." He said, "Mother, how do you think I'd get out of here?"

WICKMAN: From Jacqueline Cochran we have a parallel to that too in her oral history thing because she too was up there and she talked to John about this. She was somewhat appalled by how he'd gotten out there; I don't remember how it was now.

BIRD: Well, it was a light plane.

WICKMAN: Well, it was suggested that there were other ways to go you know.

BIRD: Yes, well, by this time, of course, Goldwater had been nominated, and General Eisenhower was very upset. He said, "I just don't know what I want to do."

WICKMAN: This is the General now?

BIRD: The General, yes. He said, "I don't know what I want to do. I'd like to do some more articles, but I just don't know what I want to write about at this point." Well, I can't remember the exact words, but it was to the effect that, if I'd get in touch with him later, maybe we could develop some suitable subjects. We did keep up some correspondence, and some weeks after the election of Lyndon Johnson, Ike agreed to write an article on the future of the Republican Party, as he saw it. We drafted that one at Gettysburg -- that is, he tape-recorded his ideas in a long interview -- in early December, just before the Eisenhowers left for Palm Desert. It was published in the Post of January 30, 1965. After that his

relations with the Post sort of tapered off. He no longer had the same feeling for the Post and I didn't blame him; the magazine had become rather far-out and wasn't all that interested in his views. So he began writing for Reader's Digest; Ben Hibbs, who had become a senior editor of the Digest, again worked with him on the articles. The Digest had long liked Ike and had reprinted all of the Post articles I had written with him.

WICKMAN: When did you leave the Post?

BIRD: Well, I stayed with the Post until it went down the drain--right to the bitter end. It wasn't a very wise decision except that I was an editor-at-large, which meant that I had a roving assignment. I could go work on anything that came along that I was interested in and the Post was interested in. I could travel anywhere, and I didn't have to go to an office. This was a very, very pleasant life and I wanted to make it last as long as possible. It offered great variety. One month I might be writing on politics, the next month on conservation, business or medicine. And so I stayed with the Post until it went down the drain in January '69.

WICKMAN: And now you're with Dynamic Maturity?

BIRD: Yes. I'm the editor. This is a pre-retirement planning magazine published by the American Association of Retired Persons. Among other things, I'm learning how to get ready for retirement which I hope will roll around in two or three years.