

Incidental Paper

**Northeast Power Failure
and Lyndon B. Johnson**

INTERVIEW WITH DONALD F. HORNIG

June 30, 1983

Francis W. A'Hearn

Program on Information Resources Policy

Harvard University

Center for Information
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Francis W. A'Hearn
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Note

Donald F. Hornig (D.H.) was Special Assistant to the President, Science and Technology, in the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson and director of the Office of Science and Technology both from 1964 to 1969. The following account of the 1965 Northeast Power failure is from an interview he gave to Francis W. A'Hearn (F.A.). It has been reviewed by Dr. Hornig and is printed by permission.

D.H. The power failure occurred about five minutes of six.

At that time the President was driving on his ranch in Texas on an inspection tour, so he heard the announcement on his car radio. That was the first thing he heard. What he did immediately was to call the Secretary of Defense. At that point Bob McNamara had not yet heard about the blackout.

Before I continue this story I must tell you the other half. I had a daughter in Cambridge. When everything went down her reaction was, "My God, there has been a nuclear attack." If so, the family in Washington had presumably been vaporized or something, so she immediately got on the telephone and called my wife. Surprisingly, the call got through immediately. She told my wife that all the power was out and, as far as she knew, everything was out all over the Northeast. My wife fortunately said to herself, "I'd better get hold of Don right away," so they didn't chat. Instead, she called me at my office in the old Executive Office Building. I thanked her and immediately switched on a TV beside my desk.

On the TV they announced that New York had just gone down and that there was no power as far west as Buffalo. It seemed quite clear that it was accidental, but nobody really knew just what was going on.

Just at that moment my phone rang, and Bob McNamara said, "Don, I just had a call from the boss, who said that the whole Northeast is blacked out. Do you know anything about it?" I said yes and told him everything I'd just seen and heard on TV!

F.A. At that point your only source of information was what you had seen on TV following your daughter's phone call?

D.H. The only reason I happened to learn it was that my panicky daughter called my wife, who called me and I turned on the TV and got it from there. At that point McNamara--given all his communications--hadn't been informed other than by the President.

F.A. And the President heard it on the radio.

D.H. A funny post script to that whole episode came later. I called the Federal Power Commission to tell Chairman Swidler they had better get on top of this, to which they replied, "We are a regulatory agency, not a technical agency." I reminded them that I figured that by the time the President wanted definitive information from them as to what was happening, the Power Commission had better have some information.

About ten minutes later they called me back and said, "Dr. Hornig, it's all under control; we now have an open line to the Wall Street Journal."

F.A. Their source of information was commercial too, then?

D.H. Presumably the Journal was on the regular A.P. wire.

F.A. It's interesting to me that President Johnson called his Secretary of Defense, McNamara. Was there any hint, do you suppose, at the time that something other than a natural domestic problem had caused that?

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D.H. Not really, but it's the first thing everyone worries about. Is it sabotage? Is it a prelude to something else? Is this Act I in an unfolding drama? There was no hint that there had been any kind of attack, but there was nothing to suggest that it might not have been sabotage. It happened dramatically and quickly, you know.

F.A. I recall it. I guess I was in college at the time. That happened in 1965.

Was there any suggestion that President Johnson or McNamara were upset or concerned by the way they learned about it through other than official sources?

D.H. I don't think so. In fact there wasn't much time delay. The whole thing unfolded in about five minutes from when the first breakdown occurred near Buffalo to the time when New York lost power. That places a real strain on communications.

One of the communications failures was to the poor controller in New York who watched his voltage go down and his frequency go down and knew something was desperately wrong. But you know, voluntarily cutting out New York City from the power net is serious business. At that stage, at 6:00 at night when it was dark, --remember this was winter-- they were borrowing so much power from the outside that anything he did to isolate the city would have blacked it out. That's a great big decision to take. So he tried desperately to call Niagara Falls, at the other end of the big power trunk, where the power was coming from and where

the trouble was coming from. He was trying to get the guy in Buffalo on the telephone and all he could get was a busy signal. So, while he was trying to get a phone call through, the whole system collapsed.

This all took minutes, so by the time the President heard it, the news couldn't have been more than a few minutes old. By the time it got through the whole sequence I have described I suppose another five or ten minutes elapsed, so it wasn't as if terrible things had been going on in the country without his being aware.

F.A. It is an interesting story . . . that the President was first alerted by his own car radio while he was down at his ranch in Texas.

D.H. Right.

F.A. Is your sense that today, for instance, if things went wrong like that, whether by natural causes or ...

D.H. My sense is that it would work exactly the same way again because even in military situations it works that way. Once upon a time we looked into the way in which information got back from Vietnam in crisis situations. We looked for an episode which wasn't so big that it just had to get through quickly, and not so small that if you found that things didn't work, you'd say it's probably good judgment on somebody's part not to bother the White House. So, we picked the attack on the consulate in Hué, a middle range episode, and then looked to see how the news got to the White House.

Well, without going through the details, the first message in was a CIA intercept of a Reuters news dispatch which went directly from Hué over commercial cables to London, rather than our transmissions from Saigon which came in something like half an hour later.

Now, again, you couldn't say anything was grossly wrong. There was no national action that had to be taken, but again it illustrates that anytime anything happens in the world, lots of things start happening. In this case a semi-military channel functioned as it might be expected to function.

F.A. That's fascinating. I guess my sense is also that today things pretty much work along those kinds of lines.

D.H. That's all right! I think that's one of the strengths of the system.

I'm on a National Academy Committee which is looking at post-attack situations, and it's called Committee on a Survivable National Communications Systems. If you ask what the real hope for survivability is, it's probably not in hardness, but it probably is in redundancy, although you still have to make plans to put the remaining pieces together.

F.A. That's an interesting thought. Perhaps having these commercial nets strung out all over is really one of our strengths.

