

WHD

Tuesday, January 14, 1969

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Tuesday, January 14th was an absolutely unique day in my thirty-four years in Washington. It was the day Lyndon gave his last State of the Union speech and I suppose his last appearance in the historical House Chamber in an official position.

It began in New York in the Pierre. Lyndon had gone back after the party late the night before and I had spent the night. In the morning I read leisurely the lovely stories about our glittering party the night before and then began to call Ashton to invite the guests who would sit with me at the State of the Union speech. Every year these guests are chosen with great care and have a very special meaning. Tonight I did not have to think at all, I knew who I wanted without any shadow of a doubt--my staff. So I began by asking Bess and Liz and Ashton, and then went on to the wives of Lyndon's staff members--they themselves can go on the floor, but not the wives, so I asked Clay McPherson, whose husband Harry had been laboring on the speech, George Christian's wife, Jo Anne, and dear Elspeth Rostow, whose husband has worked harder and endured more of the ordeals connected with these five years than anyone, I think, except possibly Rusk; Edwina Johnson and Mrs. Middleton, whose husbands are going to Texas with us; Dr. Chester Newland, the Director of the Library; Diana McArthur and June White; and Marie and Mary Rather--those two wonderful people that I always want to make room for in anything that is close to us. It took a number of

calls to readjust and plan the seats. I decided to put Lynda on my right and Elspeth next to her and ask Luci to sit on a step seat on my left. Years of State of the Union pictures have proved that the eye of the TV camera bores in on this step seat, the number one seat, and then along the first row. Then I tried on my Inaugural dress, a less than exciting business. I wanted to look proud and elegant but there was no great importance about the costume this year.

A little past twelve, I left the Pierre with Bess, and as we waited for the Secret Service car out front, the doorman looked at us with half attention and said, "Does anybody want a taxi?" No flurry, no ripple of excitement as I passed. Portent of things to come? Ah, I could settle into this easy!

We went home on the shuttle and at the White House had lunch on a tray with Luci in my room, worked with Ashton in the afternoon, asked the kitchen to have a pick-up supper, a buffet that we could eat on trays, because it is our habit to return from State of the Unions with staff and friends and sit around and listen to the evaluation of the message.

Lyndon spent a good deal of the afternoon down in the theater practicing the speech and part of it in bed resting, and going over the final drafts. He seemed very weary and has this past month or so, almost as though now that he's so near the finish he could afford to show it, at least to those close around him.

I was to leave for the Capitol about eight-thirty, Lyndon would follow in one of those split second timed tour de force arrivals that brings him into the chamber at the exact moment. Years of experience have taught me that these are hard on the nerves, and so I go earlier. And thus it was about eight-fifteen when the traumatic part of the evening began for me. Always, I think, and especially since last March 31st, I have lived fully, deeply the drama of our situation, of the events that have buffeted our country, and the part we have shared in them, have been tuned in on the tragedy and the glory, the warmth and color and pain of these times. But I have kept an impassive face, I think, a rather dignified face, but I have said to myself that sometimes I would cry--but it would probably be when some third grade class in some little community broke out into "America" and not at any great state occasion, not at any glittering event. Well, tonight I did cry in public, on TV, and with an audience of several million, I expect. So much for cool assurance and high resolve!

It was approaching eight-thirty when Luci brought little Patrick Lyn in to kiss his grandfather and tell him goodbye. He had on his pajamas. Lyndon looked at him surprised and said, "Isn't he going up to the State of the Union?" Luci said, "No, Daddy, we thought it best--" and I broke in, horrified, and said, "No dear, I don't think we had better take that little boy up there." Lyndon looked up at us, rather pathetic in fact, and said,

"Have I asked you to use any other seat for anybody?" He hadn't, I had disposed of every one. Luci said, "Alright, Daddy," threw me a desperate glance and went out with Patrick Lyn in her arms-- and so began the evening! In about five minutes she had him in one of his many cute little outfits and together we started for the Capitol--Lynda, Luci, Lyn and I in the backseat of the big black car and as it rapidly consumed the short distance to the Capitol we looked at each other and said, "What are we going to do?" Tonight was important to all of us. Lyn had been becoming increasingly rambunctious, and adorable as he is, I felt that he had been exposed a bit too much to cameras and crowds and newspaper stories, was inclined to wind up inappropriately on center stage. "What shall we do?" we all said, looking at each other.

"Luci, we'd better phone back to the White House and get Olga to follow us within ten or fifteen minutes if she can, and stand outside the gallery and be ready to take him after he's been there just a few minutes. His grandfather can see him as he walks in and then we'll just let him disappear and Olga can take him to that nice ladies rest room that's on the same floor for the forty-five or so minutes of the speech. Can you work that out, Jerry?" Jerry could and would, and got on the phone with instructions, and then we began to talk about how on earth could we, sitting on the first row with Lyn get him back to the door of the gallery since every aisle seat would be filled with a body. Jerry put in cheerfully, "We

could pass him over our heads, hand over hand!" And on that delightful word picture of an accompaniment to the State of the Union message, we drove up to the side door of the great old Capitol building.

There was Luci's friend of school days who used to be a Senate Page, named [Don] Anderson, who escorted us from the car down the aisles and into the elevator, and presently Fishbait Miller. How can we possibly ever have a State of the Union message if Fishbait is no longer there? As we were whisked down the aisles, I could see little crowds of people gathered behind the barriers all waving, some calling out, and then we were asked to wait in an upper hall for a few moments because timing is important in this great pageantry. Then we got the signal and I led the way into the box, pausing to look down below me on the assembled House and Senate of the United States in that dear familiar chamber. And then below me, they began to rise and clap and broke out into cheering on both sides, Republican and Democrat. I looked to right and left my eyes sweeping the whole chamber below me acknowledging with warmth and, I hope, dignity their standing ovation and then picked my way carefully down the steps between the wives of the members of the Supreme Court and our Cabinet and past my own guests and took my seat on the front row, with Lynda on my right and Luci on the step beside me, Patrick Lyn on her lap, [I] leaned over [him] to speak to Muriel.

The hands of the clock stood at about ten to nine. From then on the evening began to disintegrate for me, hopelessly, irreparably. Lyn crawled over his mother's lap, over mine, waved his bottle of milk in one arm and his book in the other, reached for the railing that separated him from the void below--we were on the front row with the drop of some twenty feet or so to the floor of the chamber below us. In the press box to our right I was aware of all the heads turning as though at a tennis match--eyes trained on our performance. I could see the faces of Frances Lewine, Helen Thomas, Betty Beale, and then Mary McGrory--mouth open, incredulous. Lyn gave his milk bottle a particularly hefty swing. I thought, "Oh Lord, what if he should drop it on one of the legislators below, perhaps H. R. Gross, or Senator Williams! What an ignominious departure from this town!" Luci threw me a martyred look and Lynda Bird gave her attention elsewhere as though she didn't belong to the group. Only Lyn remained blissfully, innocently, unaware that he was causing a furor. As he continued to climb around over us and gurgle and respond to everybody's attention, I began to laugh--helplessly, irresistibly--holding my handkerchief in front of my mouth, trying in that extremely conspicuous spot to be inconspicuous. Tears were streaming down my face, I couldn't help it--my eyes were drawn irresistibly back to the press box. Mary McGrory's expression remained frozen. I have lived with her ascorbic columns comfortably enough for five years. What I know or believe is untrue, wrong doesn't bother me. But to read

one of them tomorrow describing with her cutting sarcasm our last appearance and to have to agree with it--that would be the bitter end!

Meanwhile the pageantry unfolded below me with scant attention from me. About five minutes of nine Fishbait Miller's spintorian [?] voice announced the Diplomatic Corps and in marched Sevilla-Sacasa at their head, followed by a pretty full contingent who took their places right below us on the right of the chamber, and then the Supreme Court sitting down front, and then Lyndon's Cabinet--and did I imagine a special wave of applause as Dean Rusk came in? I think not, I think it was real and warm. Whatever the rancors of these years he goes out with the respect of this town, even--I think--its admiration, if sometimes grudging. Fishbait's voice rang out, "The Pres-ee-dent of the United States." The chamber rose, the wave of applause washed across it, was sustained, and down the aisle came Lyndon, following the committee that led him in, turning to the right and left, smiling, waving, pausing to shake hands now and then. He went to the Speaker's stand and paused a full several moments to absorb, receive the ovation, the farewell of the members of the House and Senate, so many of whom had shared his working life for years or decades.

It was a good speech and I was increasingly glad that he had decided to come here and make it, and not just send up a paper. At first it was too slow, it grew in tempo and appeal as he went along.

They liked it when he said, it had been thirty-eight years since he had first stood in the House chamber as a doorkeeper in the gallery. I think we all liked it, we felt it was fair and generous when he said that "President Nixon will need your understanding just as I did." I liked the forthright statement that there'd been "some disappointments, some failures of achievement." I liked it best of all and I particularly relished looking at my two daughters when he said, "I cannot speak of Vietnam without paying a personal tribute to the men who have carried the battle for us there. I have been honored to be their Commander-in-Chief." The applause swelled through the chamber, I like to think that line was directed straight up to my right and to my left. Luci of course was back by this time. About ten minutes after Lyndon had begun, she had scooped up Lyn and somehow managed to make her way up the crowded aisle and give him to Olga outside the door.

As all good speeches should, the ending was the best. It was something like this, "I hope it may be said a hundred years from now that together we helped to make our country more just for all its people, as well as to insure the blessings of liberty for our posterity. I believe that it will be said that we tried." I looked around me, satisfied. Bess on the front row, was frankly crying. There were tears in lots of eyes, but I had long since ceased.



I led the way to the elevator, the newspaper ladies crowding around, all wanting a quote, tried to produce something sensible for them. I love what Betty Beale said the next day, "It was a night for cheers, for tears, for recollections, for regrets, for forgiveness, and it was Lyndon Johnson's night." It had been. I could sense Lynda and Luci coming along behind me, Luci chattering at ease and at full speed--she gets along well with newspaper people--they like each other, I think. Lynda quieter, preferring to say nothing if she could. The Secret Service led us down to the Speaker's office as always and there was assembled along with the Speaker and Miss Harriet in her chair, barely able to rise, the Leadership, Hale Boggs, Carl Albert. I was glad to see Senator McGee who will be back on Foreign Relations. We spoke quickly to as many as we could reach and then left hurriedly to return to the second floor carrying staff and friends with us, ready for the last act of a State of the Union night--that is a gathering where you get the reviews. Lyndon went to his bedroom and had the TV on there, the three-faced one. I had one on in the West Hall. Bess and Tyler came and Dr. Newland, Tom and Edwina Johnson, the George Christians, Jim Jones and Larry Temple, Marie and Harry and Clay and Mary, and Walt and Eslopeth Rostow, and Bill and June White, and of course Luci and Lynda.

I watched a round table discussion of the speech in which I think it was Schlesinger and Jack Valenti and Bill Moyers and some

nutty man from the Village Voice. In general the reviews were good and I closed the page on the day with a feeling of satisfaction. This had hung in the balance for a while and I'm glad the decision was made as it had been. It had been a good speech, a good performance, a great exit, I thought.

We all went into the Dining Room and loaded our plates from the ample buffet, sat around in the West Hall and on the floor and wherever anyone could find a chair, saying our goodbyes to each other and the time, and I at least to this room for this is the last Tuesday I will be here in this capacity, and probably ever.