

INTERVIEW III

DATE: July 1, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: BESS ABELL

INTERVIEWER: T. H. BAKER

PLACE: Mrs. Abell's home in Washington, D.C.

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B: Mrs. Abell, to get to the White House parties, first of all, when you're social secretary, do the parties fall into types?

A: Yes, they do fall into types, absolutely. There are the State dinners that are the most formal occasions that are given at the White House, and these are to honor the President's high-ranking visitors from abroad--the prime ministers, the kings and the presidents who come to this country on a State visit, an official visit, or a working visit.

Then there are the receptions and teas, and these could be for everything from the officers of the DAR to three thousand Democratic women who are in town for a Democratic women's conference. Mrs. Johnson had a number of teas for the kind and generous people who had given furnishings and paintings to the White House collection. Then there were also the teas and receptions for young people, for 4-H kids from out of town.

B: How do you decide when to have a party? Obviously some of them dictate themselves--the State dinners.

A: The State dinner dictates itself.

B: Do you try to have so many parties a week?

A: No, there would be occasionally a week that would go by, even when the President and Mrs. Johnson were in town, with maybe only one or two parties; then the next week you might run an average of three a day. On the average, for the whole five years that the Johnsons were there, there would probably be, if you averaged it out, a party and a half a day. When I say a party and a half a day, I'm just speaking of a function. One party might be the reception for three thousand ladies; another might be three ambassadors' wives for tea; another party might be four thousand foreign students; and another might be a State dinner for a hundred and forty guests.

B: I may have phrased that question backwards. It may be that the problem is avoiding having parties. Surely there are a lot of groups who come to Washington and request a

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reception or something--

A: There are a whole lot more ideas generated than you can possibly use. The President and Mrs. Johnson, as I'm sure you've heard hundreds of times when you're doing these interviews--the President moved into that house and repeatedly said when he would meet with groups either socially or business-wise, "This is your house, and I just have a short-term lease here." And they really felt that. They wanted to share that house and its history with as many people as they could, and I must say the rate of entertaining in the White House seemed to go up much more rapidly than our population explosion.

In looking back on the records, not just during the Johnson Administration, but since the end of World War II, I went over the figures with the White House housekeeper one day. The number of people entertained in the White House doubled about every three years, and that doesn't make so much difference when you're doubling from one hundred to two hundred, but when you're doubling from ten thousand to twenty thousand to forty thousand, it's a significant increase.

B: Let me interrupt here. Did your office keep written records of the mechanics of each of the parties?

A: An office in the White House does, and it was an office that in effect was one that I was responsible for, but not physically in my office. It was done in Sandy Fox's office, which was called the Social Entertainments Office. It is one of the most interesting offices in the White House, because you can go back in their records and see who sat next to who when Teddy Roosevelt was president and what they ate.

B: I was asking to give a clue to anyone using this. I would assume probably copies of those records for the Johnson period would be in the Johnson Library.

A: They will be in the Library. The scrapbooks are kept in that office. They make a set of three scrapbooks, and I'm fortunate enough to have one set. One set goes to the Library, one set stays in their office, and they give a set to the social secretary.

B: That's a lovely souvenir.

A: Isn't that nice! There they are, over there in the corner.

B: Big, aren't they!

A: Nice and fat.

B: This will serve as a clue to anyone using this then, the written material.

A: And they can tell in that office how the entertaining has increased by the number of

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scrapbooks that pile up per year, and how fat it is.

B: Did President Johnson ever originate an idea for a party or some kind of entertainment?

A: You've got to be kidding! All the time! Always, whether it was an informal gathering of Sunday night supper when he would tell his wife to call some friends in to dinner, or whether it was a luncheon planned the day before for three prime ministers who were in this country at the United Nations, which was quite a feat in itself. My memory is foggy on that--let's see. They weren't all prime ministers. There was the foreign minister of Great Britain, Mr. Brown; and I think [Aldo] Moro of Italy, and Prime Minister Krag of Denmark. I've now forgotten what the occasion was of their visit to New York, I seem to recollect it had something to do with NATO. But the President called me in the afternoon, about two or three in the afternoon, and he said, would it be possible to do this." My attitude in working with President Johnson was always that anything is possible, it's just that some things are more difficult than others. So we knew it was possible, but we didn't know quite how possible.

So he said, "Well, make up a guest list, do the grocery shopping, send me a suggested guest list, and I will be back in touch with you and let you know whether or not we're going ahead with it."

So he in the meantime was trying to reach the people. My office went to work on developing a guest list which--

B: All of this was on one day's notice?

A: Yes, this was in the afternoon before the luncheon the next day, and we just told everybody around the office that if they had plans that evening they'd better cancel them--they might be able to go ahead, but they'd probably better cancel them. And as I was typing a page of the list in my typewriter, my secretary would take it and make a clean copy and make a carbon for the people who would do the invitations and the place cards down the hall in the Social Entertainments Office.

So in effect we had the place cards done before the guests were invited. I think I finally got the okay about five or six o'clock to go ahead and invite some people, but he said, "We don't know if these people are going to be able to come definitely. We think they're going to be able to come."

So what we did that night was, I just had the girls who make telephone calls to issue invitations, which Emily Post will tell you you're not supposed to do from the White House but Emily Post doesn't know that we have to work with the possible; they called the people who were in government, people who were in the State Department and people who were in the agencies and invited them. They just said, "The President wants you--or your boss--to come for lunch tomorrow at one o'clock, southwest gate." I said, "Don't tell

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them who it's for or anything."

So the next morning we were flooded with calls from people who had accepted the invitation and then they thought, well, what's it for. Fortunately by that time we were able to tell them that it was in honor of the four foreign guests.

But it worked out very well. I've forgotten what the chef had, but I know that he had to get some of the wholesalers not out of bed, but to reach them at home and say, "What do you have for me tomorrow morning," so that we could plan the menu.

B: Did that kind of thing happen often?

A: Not nearly as often as people think. Of course, Johnson was always the person to make the spur of the moment trip, to have the spur of the moment entertainment. I would guess that maybe a tenth of our entertaining or less was done on short notice. Some of it was because of an idea that came to the President or an idea that was presented to him that he bought and time was short and we just moved ahead with it. A lot of it was also because of the world situation, this jet age diplomacy that we live in. I suppose twenty-thirty years ago when people crossed the Atlantic more often in boats than in airplanes that plans were made further ahead of time, and they were more relaxed. But now you can get to Washington from any capital in the world in something like sixteen or eighteen hours, and some of our State functions were planned with as little as ten days' notice; also, others when we had six months' notice, we would move up almost to the wire with the invitations out and the place cards written and the food ordered and then the visitor from abroad wouldn't be able to come.

In the case of Mr. Bourguiba of Tunisia, he had a health problem. And in the case of the President of Chile, Mr. Frei, he was all set to come and then his Senate, which has to vote to say "You, Mr. President, can leave the country," embarrassed him greatly by saying that he couldn't leave the country.

So it really covered the waterfront between months of planning and practically no planning. At one time we were in a meeting in the Situation Room with Mr. Rostow to talk about the proposed visit of a leader of an African country, and just as the meeting began someone rushed in with a long, long face, and handed a note to Mr. Rostow--we were all terribly concerned--and Walt just looked up and laughed and said, "Well, I guess we can all leave. The Prime Minister has been deposed."

B: Did that ever get so close that you had to disinvite someone?

A: Oh yes. We did in the case of the Chile dinner, and we did at least one other time have to actually cancel a dinner. What do you do with the ladies who talked their husbands into spending a couple of hundred dollars for their new dress--you try and invite them again. And I think before President Johnson's administration was out we had backtracked on all

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those people and included them in one dinner or another.

B: That was thoughtful. Does a State dinner ever get routine?

A: Thank goodness a lot of the things do fall into a routine! You always have to have place cards, and they're always the same. They always have the gold seal on them. We always had flowers. We always had menus on the table. We always sent out the invitations. So all those things do develop into a pattern, but there are always the last minute crises, the advanced crises.

B: What are some of the examples of the crises?

A: One of the grimmest was for the President of Chad in October of 1968. It was also my husband's very first foreign visitor during his short four months as chief of protocol. Tyler was sworn in on a Tuesday and flew to New York on a Wednesday to meet the President of Chad and bring him back to Washington to introduce him to the President--our President.

The day's activities had gone relatively smoothly for Tyler. As the President of Chad didn't bring his wife with him--or wives with him--I stayed in the White House, Tyler went over to Blair House to pick up the President and bring him to the White House. This was always something of a problem, because we tried to coordinate the President's arrival on the front steps of the north portico with the arrival of the visiting guest of honor, who would come by limousine from across the street at Blair House. Generally it works smoothly, but there was always guesswork involved. The President would arrive in the house and I would immediately call Blair House and tell the chief of protocol that he was there and he'd be dressed in a matter of moments. The President really could change from business suit into black tie and occasionally take a shower to boot in about three minutes. He was really the speediest dresser I've ever known.

But sometimes the Prime Minister might be delayed, zipping up his wife's dress or who knows what! We tried to work it out so that one wasn't waiting for the other on the front steps. But I'm digressing.

We finally got Tyler and the President of Chad and President Johnson all down on the front steps at the same time and as Tyler walked in the door he leaned over to me and he said, "Honey, the wife of the Ambassador isn't coming," which ordinarily wouldn't have bothered me too much, but as she was the only woman in the foreign party, I had seated her on the President's right, and she was the only member of the foreign party who was seated at his table. So it meant some substantial rejujgling of at least four tables in the dining room, and all of those people that I would have to rejujgle already knew where they were supposed to sit. So I got Sandy Fox, whose office, once the seating is done, puts the cards on the table and hands out the escort envelopes to the guests as they come in. I called him up on the second floor with me, explained the problem to him, and then

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we started doing an alternate seating plan and marking down "Well, I'll have to tell Secretary Rusk that instead of at table eight, he's at table two. And we'll have to get to the Foreign Minister of Chad and tell him he's not at table two, he's at table one," etc. And simultaneously I called Mrs. Wilroy, who is the very capable jack-of-all-trades who is the housekeeper at Blair House, and said, "What gives?"

And she said, "Well, I think that the Ambassador just didn't want her to come, but I am going to try and get her there, and I think I can. I've told her that she's expected."

I said, "Well, tell her that the President and Mrs. Johnson will be hurt if she doesn't come, and if that doesn't work, tell her they'll be offended if she doesn't come."

I had spoken with the Ambassador of Chad just very briefly. Also, I should mention that they had been in this country only about three days--the Ambassador and his wife--and she was really a scared little butterfly of a lady who I don't think was terribly far from the bush country. I don't think that she'd ever spent much time in a city or very much time in formal clothes or formal situations. But Mrs. Wilroy called me about five minutes later, just before the President was going to take his guest of honor down the steps after they'd had an informal gathering upstairs with the Vice President and Secretary of State, etc., and said, "She is on her way."

She walked in the north door of the White House, just as the President was bringing the President of Chad down the grand staircase, and the Ambassador of Chad was with them. He looked like a very surprised gentleman when he saw his wife come in the door. But she looked very pleasant and she handled herself very well and has since told me when I've seen her very occasionally at an embassy party that she was so grateful that we pushed her and encouraged her into coming.

B: Any other near crises like that that you can recall?

A: There have been loads of them. Probably one of the worst moments that I ever went through on an entertainment was at a busy time. We were having a lot of State dinners, and sort of superimposed on top of all the other entertaining that was being done, all the other activities that were going on in the White House, the Prime Minister of Great Britain was coming as the President's guest, with maybe seven or eight days notice. I think maybe his trip had been planned earlier as an informal working visit, and the President added the dinner to the schedule a week ahead.

For a State dinner we always have some form of entertainment after the dinner. Who do you call on with seven days notice in that busy world of entertainment! The only person that I could call on was someone who I really considered a personal friend and somebody that the Johnsons considered a friend and vice versa. So I called Bob Merrill, who's a great baritone at the Metropolitan Opera and who had entertained at the White House before, and both he and his wife were at home. I said, "What are you doing on

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Tuesday, April --- whatever?" And he said, "Well, I'm not doing anything. I'm giving a concert the night before down in South Carolina, and I'm giving a concert the next day in New York." I said, "Well, that's just great. You can stop by Washington in between times and sing for the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Harold Wilson."

"Oh, that's great. I'd love to. I'll be there." I said, "You and Marian talk about the program and then call me later with the songs that you're going to sing and I'll put together the rest of the program. You just let me know the songs you're going to sing and we'll print it and have it all done." It was just a very easy thing to put together because his very nice, lovely wife is his accompanist. Bob had been at the White House beforehand, so you didn't have to go into any complicated explanations.

He called me two or three days later and gave me the list of songs that he was going to sing, and I took the list of songs down to Liz Carpenter and she typed up the press release. The next thing I heard was a call from Walt Rostow with sort of a hint of disbelief and a hint of hysterics in his voice and he said, "You can't be serious. You really can't be serious. You're not going to sing for the Prime Minister who has just announced withdrawal of forces east of Suez 'On the Road to Mandalay'!. And you can't sing for the Prime Minister, who has just devalued the British pound 'I Got Plenty of Nothin'." And I just got on my high horse and tried to explain to Mr. Rostow that music and art were not politics, but we quickly found out with the afternoon papers that where a foreign visitor was concerned, where the Prime Minister of Great Britain was concerned, art and music were politics. I'll always regret, as Bob does, that the Prime Minister took such a ribbing back home, that the cartoonists and the Art Buchwalds of London gave him about this.

The State Department types and the National Security types said, "You just have to change the program." I felt that it was better to stick with the program and then add a song to make light of it, called, "It Ain't Necessarily So."

But anyway I talked to Bob and I said, "Better come up with an alternate program, but don't discuss it with anybody if you can avoid it," because of course his phone was ringing off the wall from reporters, both the Variety-types and foreign correspondent-types. Since it was the age of the protest, they thought that possibly Bob had planned this program in order to embarrass the Prime Minister, which was the furthest thing from his thought. He had just picked songs from his light concert program.

So we planned to change the program and sing other songs, and I had another program printed. That morning the Prime Minister arrived, and he had gotten word, I guess, through our State Department that the program was going to be changed. "Mr. Prime Minister, you'll be happy to know that we're not going to sing those songs for you!" And he told the President: "Now, I can survive the program as originally planned, but I can't survive your changing the program."

So I tried to reach Bob Merrill to be sure that he brought the other music with

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him, and he had already left, but foresighted Bob and Marian Merrill had brought all the music with them and we went back to the other program and added the song, "It Ain't Necessarily So." I think it really turned out all right.

B: That's right. I remember the news accounts of the whole long affair. What was President Johnson's private reaction? Does that kind of thing tend to upset him, when something goes wrong in a program?

A: I think that that kind of thing tends to upset everybody. I'm sure that he was concerned about it. He didn't say to me, as he occasionally did to me and other members of the staff, "Any mistake that could possibly be made in this venture you somehow have managed to make." I don't know, I think the President really had pretty much the same feeling that it was unfortunate, but that art and music really aren't politics. I never did get the feeling from him that he was concerned about it. I can't remember whether I got the word from him or how, that we were to go back to the original program.

B: How?

A: From him, or how I got it, that we were to go back to the original program. But I really don't believe that that upset him. You'll have to read his diary to find out.

B: What sort of mistakes did tend to upset him, that is, when he was obviously upset and let you know about it?

A: Things about the girls' weddings. When David Dubinsky called him with tears in his voice and said, "Mr. President, you can't have Luci married in a non-union dress." I must say that in working with Luci on her wedding, the fact that her dress would or would not have a union label in it was the furthestest thing from my thoughts. The foremost thing in my thoughts on Luci's dress was trying to keep it a secret. Not the wedding, but the dress. I went up to New York and visited a lot of bridal houses to look at dresses for my younger sister who was in South America and was only going to return something like two weeks before her wedding--that was my ploy. And we picked up a number of dresses to take home and show to her mother and mine, and then took them back after Luci had tried them on.

Luci could not operate from a sketch as Lynda could. Therefore, Lynda could go to a designer and say, "Show me some sketches." Luci didn't think that way. She wanted to be able to put the dress on, try it on. Most of the good bridal houses at that time, and probably still are, are non-union. They tell me that they pay higher wages, but that they are not union houses.

So the President really was very upset about that. He said, "You just have to have that dress made with a union label on it. I don't care what happens but it has to have a union label in it. It's just too embarrassing and too wrong, and you shouldn't have done it

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that way in the first place." And he was right. We shouldn't have, but we did.

So what was done, Priscilla--Priscilla of Boston, the designer--had a friend who did have a union house, not a bridal house, but who had a union shop, and the dress, I believe was cut there and some of the work was done on it there--enough of it so that it could legitimately have a union label in it--and then it was brought back to Priscilla's shop and finished up by her girls. It's hard to imagine, even looking back on it, what a big deal it was, but everybody was after the design of that dress. They all wanted to know what it was, and whoever found it out would have a great big scoop. The newspaper people were going into bridal houses under all kinds of guises, trying to get pictures or details about Luci's wedding dress.

B: Didn't Women's Wear Daily publish a sketch of Luci or Lynda's dress?

A: They published them both. They were more accurate on Lynda's than they were on Luci's--they really didn't get Luci's.

B: Was there any retaliation against Women's Wear Daily?

A: I think that the retaliation really worked to Women's Wear Daily's benefit. I think their circulation went up by something like a hundred thousand after all the hiatus about the wedding. Liz Carpenter told them after they broke a release date, which they said they weren't bound by because they did not come to her press conference--they got it from somebody else who was there, she refused them credentials to the wedding so there was sort of a battle on the front pages between Liz and Women's Wear Daily, and I think they both feel they won.

Then we made another mistake in Luci's wedding, which upset the President terribly. The wedding was out in the National Shrine on a very, very hot day in August, in the middle of a very, very hot week in August--a very, very hot summer. And it was going to be a long ceremony. The wedding ceremony itself, the mass, etc., ran about an hour and fifteen minutes, and the shrine was hot. Two days before we had a call from one of the airlines--it was during the middle of the airline strike--saying, "We have all this air-conditioning equipment which we ordinarily use in our planes, and our planes aren't flying anywhere. We've been reading about how hot it is in the church, and we could bring these machines out and we'd be happy to do it with no publicity, no nothing, and air condition the church for you. We can set them up late in the afternoon, run them all night long, run them up until just before the guests are ready to come in and then turn them off, and you'll have enough cool air in there to keep all those people very, very comfortable." And I was ecstatic about the idea! I've forgotten who we discussed it with. I discussed it, I think, with Clark Clifford--he was sort of our unofficial legal wedding adviser--and he said he thought it was just fine, so we proceeded ahead with it, telling them, yes, we'd love to have it.

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And the air conditioning trucks were on their way out to the shrine when either Jim Reynolds, who was assistant secretary of labor and who had been very much involved in the airline negotiation--in fact, he had taken time off from his problems with the airlines to help me get out of the mess with David Dubinsky and tell me what we could do to make Mr. Dubinsky happy and make the bride happy. And right in the middle of his airline negotiations, here we presented him another problem, and he just hit the ceiling, as did Bill Wirtz. I think Bill called the President and said, "You just can't do this. These airlines are on strike and it's just going to blow the whole thing sky high."

That's when the President called and he said, "Any mistake that has been possible to make you have made!" And he was furious with me and with Liz Carpenter and his wife and everybody.

We called off the air conditioning, and I've always given Bill Wirtz what-for about it because Lynda passed out from the heat and everybody else nearly died. When I got back to the White House after the ceremony--I had known how hot I was going to be--I had another dress there to change. I just perspired all the way through mine, and there were a lot of other people there who wished they could have changed. But it worked out all right. She got married, despite the lack of air conditioning.

B: How did she take all of these controversies?

A: I think really the only thing that upset Luci--Luci was very, very much in love and she really didn't let any of that bother her, but the only thing that I remember that really upset Luci, and I always will be sort of annoyed at the bridesmaid who caused the problem, but I had worked out where the girls and where the boys who were in the wedding party were going to stand and who they were going to walk out with, not by who they were madly in love with or who they had an enormous crush on but by height and who would look the best.

After the rehearsal, the day before the wedding down at the Shrine, one of Luci's bridesmaids just really fussed at Luci, and I think broke down into tears because she couldn't understand that Luci would make her walk out with Joe instead of Bill, whom Luci knew that she had fallen madly in love with during all the wedding parties. I thought "Of all the things to come and worry a bride with the night before she gets married, when she's got enough other things on her mind!" So Luci was very tearful too.

In any case we changed the walking-out order in order to make the girl happy, and then it made some other little girl very unhappy--one of those very silly things. But I really don't think these things bothered Luci. She was an excited, thrilled little girl who was getting ready to be a grown-up wife.

B: Back to parties in general. How do you go about fixing up a guest list? I would assume at the beginning that there are certain mandatory guests, depending on the type of party.

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A: Depending upon the type of party, many of your guest lists are ready-made. If you're entertaining the officers of the American Bar Association, that's predetermined by somebody else; if you're having a reception for the White House Fellows, that's predetermined--you have the White House Fellows. If you're having a dinner for a head of state, some of that's predetermined.

We set up some guidelines for ourselves to work within. I just arbitrarily said, after thinking that this is probably the fairest number for the foreign visitor and for us, that "we will have ten members of your official party." Some visitors from abroad come with three people; others have a tendency to come with thirty people. But when they're told that only ten members of their official party can come to the White House, this cuts down on the number of people that they bring with them, which is really good for everybody. It's good for the logistics people planning the moves, it's good for the people entertaining them at other places that they go.

And then the people that were always invited were the Vice President, the Secretary of State, and if the Secretary of State were not there, we would always have the Assistant Secretary from the State Department, We would always have the Chief of Protocol and his wife; we would always have the Under Secretary of State who was responsible for that particular area. If it was the President of Colombia, it would be the Assistant Secretary for Latin American Affairs. We would always have of course the ambassador from their country to ours; we would always have our ambassador from our country to theirs.

And then from there it was free, but it did fall into categories. We would always try and invite two additional cabinet members above and beyond the Secretary of State. The Secretary of the Treasury was most often invited because these people very frequently had money problems. If it was a country that was very interested in improving their agriculture, we would try and have the Secretary of Agriculture, so that we would have a couple of cabinet members, and we tried to rotate it so that the same Secretary didn't come every single time, but that each one of them were given an opportunity to meet the foreign visitors.

The same thing was done with members of Congress. We would invite ten or twelve members of the House and Senate, but try to rotate those.

In the business community and in the banking community we would attempt to have the people who had business in those countries.

B: Did you get help in finding out that kind of information?

A: Oh yes. I guess the first person who really touched this guest list, who began the model of it, who began working with it, would be the desk officer from the country. And the list

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that came to me was really only so good as the imagination and ingenuity of that desk officer, really. It was hard for me to get over to the desk officer that "I know that you want to have Rusk and you want to have Dillon--or Fowler, whoever was the Treasury Secretary, or Joe Barr--and that you want to have Mansfield and Dirksen and Hickenlooper and Fulbright. But don't you realize that these are the people who every country wants to have and out of the last six dinners, they've just been here three times, and we want to have other people. We want to reach around and have somebody else on the Foreign Relations Committee, somebody else in the Democratic leadership." So that a lot of the names that would come from the State Department were the same on every single guest list, and it was up to my office to try and weed those out and not invite Senator John Sherman Cooper to eight dinners in a row.

B: Then the guest lists also went beyond that into just private citizens, entertainers and such.

A: Yes, we tried to introduce this visitor from abroad to a wide variety of Americans. He might, in standing in that receiving line, meet going down it a man who had been a missionary in his country, twelve-twenty years before. He might meet a young man and his wife who had served there in the Peace Corps. He might meet a man who had been over working with his highway department on developing an effective road system.

B: Where do these suggestions come from? Again, someone must help you--

A: They do. And as I say, a lot of this comes from the really good desk officers, but also a lot of them don't take it seriously. They think that the man would be much more interested in meeting Senator Fulbright and Senator Hickenlooper and the Secretary of the Treasury. And maybe he would. Some of them would, some of them wouldn't. But we tried to spread those invitations around and have some other people who had something to do with that country.

Now everybody who was invited obviously didn't have something to do with that country. Mrs. Johnson on her trips, the President on his trips would meet a teacher or mayor and would come back from the trip and say, "Invite Susie Glutch to the next dinner that seems appropriate for her. People who would serve on special commissions for the President for the good of the country and not for the per diem involved, the President would frequently try to say, "Thank you. I appreciate what you did for me," by having them to a dinner in the White House. They would invite some staff members from the White House. They would invite some entertainers, and these might have been entertainers who had gone on the campaign trail for the President in 1964, or they might have been entertainers who had volunteered to do it in 1968. Or they might be an entertainer who was in the news, hopefully favorably for one reason or another. Or it might be Charlton Heston invited to the dinner for the Prime Minister of Australia because he had spent six months in Australia touring in a play.

B: Were some of the guests selected for political purposes, in the sense of past or maybe

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future campaign contributors?

A: Oh sure, absolutely. The governors and mayors were never overlooked. We never could have enough of them, but the President would almost always invite one or two governors to a dinner. Governors, depending upon the time of the year, find it very hard to get away for something like this. They've got colossal legislative programs. But he did frequently issue the invitations to them. When they could come, he frequently would invite them to be overnight guests at the White House so that he could see more of them than a howdy and a shake in a receiving line.

B: Did the President have final authority on the guest list? Did he see the list?

A: Yes, he always did see the list. I'm rambling on around Robin Hood's barn and not doing this very effectively, but the first person who touches the guest list is the desk officer. From there it goes to the office of the Chief of Protocol. They would gather up from various other places in the State Department, from their congressional relations office, from their cultural affairs office, other suggestions. The cultural affairs office would know that Charlton Heston had been in Australia for six months, or they would know that Peter Nero had given a concert for the King of Thailand, and so those names would come over.

One of my hardest battles with these people was to say, "I'm very dumb. I don't know who Charlton Heston is. If you write him down on that guest list, you have to tell me who he is and why the President ought to invite him." It was a never ending battle because everybody assumed that I was smarter than I was, or they thought if I didn't know who he was that the President would know who he was, but the President was a busy man and he might not know who he is either, or he certainly would not likely know that he'd just given a concert for the Prime Minister, and they got along very well and he ought to come back.

So then the Chief of Protocol approves that list, and then it comes to my office. I would go over it and primarily at this point scratch people off, the people who had just been, the people I just knew that there wasn't going to be room to have; and at the same time or previous to this we would have called Mike Manatos, who was administrative assistant for congressional relations for the Senate, and we would have called the person who was responsible for the House side, and they would send us the number of names that we requested of Senate members and House members, and also with a sentence: "Mr. President, or Mrs. Johnson, you will want to have this, man because--"

And then I would get press names from Liz Carpenter and from George Christian. I would almost always go over all these bits and pieces of paper with the man in the National Security Council who was responsible for that area and ask his advice. You know, "Here are eighteen businessmen. Who are the three really musts? What are they? Who's first, second, third, and fourth priority on them?" So that when we got the list finished and the President added twenty names to it we would know that we had to cut

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and we wouldn't have to make all those calls over again.

There were also people who were invited who were contributors to the Democratic Party. We didn't want to have too many of them at a time because they wouldn't have any fun if they came and just saw each other. They know each other, and they're used to going to those thousand dollar dinners, but if they go and they get to meet the cabinet members and the Congress and a couple of movie stars then they think that they've really had a good time.

That was a problem that I had at the beginning with the National Committee people. They thought that we ought to have each dinner at least half Democratic contributors because then they could polish off their list much faster, but I finally sold them on the idea that it was more of a compliment to be invited as 10 percent instead of 50 percent.

B: Did the President generally accept most of the lists as they were shaped by all of this process ?

A: I would say most of them, yes, because by the time the list got to him--I had the advantage of having worked with them before. You know, you can't always zip yourself up in somebody else's skin and know how they think, but I tried to present a list to him that was, one, balanced, and, two, not so heavy in numbers that he would have to cut it. Frequently I would get a list back from him that would have eight people added on it, and I would say to the President and Mrs. Johnson when I sent them the list, "Here it is. It numbers two hundred. We should cut twenty people from it before we can safely send out the invitations." The President might add twenty more and say, "You cut it."

B: Did you have to worry about people the President might be temporarily angry with?

A: Well, yes. Occasionally he would send me a memo and he'd say, "Have Joe Blow to the very next State dinner," and I would put Joe Blow's name on the list for the very next State dinner and he'd scratch him out and say, "Don't ever invite him." I would think that I was living in some other world.

In one of those cases, I was very distressed about it because I just couldn't understand why he was so angry with this man. He didn't say, "Don't ever invite him," but he had scratched through it sort of like that, and everybody else that he had scratched out just had a nice little line through it. So I with fear and trepidation a couple of days later mentioned it to Mrs. Johnson. I said, "Is there a problem?" And she laughed and said, "No, he was at dinner with us the night before."

B: Do people on guest lists like that have to be cleared for security purposes by the Secret Service?

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A: Yes, they are. It used to be that the Secret Service would take the list after everybody had accepted and go through it; I don't know what caused the change; to my knowledge it was not done during the Kennedy Administration. I think the initial problem came in 1964, when the President had the first presidential scholars, a group of one hundred and twenty young people--including a boy and a girl from each state--young high school students who were selected really just for brains. After the first year I thought maybe one of the requirements might have been unattractive looks and manners. They weren't a great bunch of guests.

After the Secret Service got the list--I may be a little bit wrong on this, but I think that this was the beginning of it--the Secret Service found that the parents of one of these kids, at least the mother, was an active Communist. They also felt that she was a little bit whacky; that she might attempt to cause the President some bodily harm.

Then after that there was a request by the Secret Service to have a quick name check on guest lists before invitations were sent out. We would know if we were inviting somebody the Internal Revenue was just getting ready to sock an indictment on, or if we were inviting somebody who had served ten years for tax fraud, or if we were inviting somebody who really was a serious Communist.

B: From whom did that request originate?

A: I think that it's somebody that the Secret Service sold the President on.

B: In the case of the presidential scholars, you tangled a bit with Eric Goldman on that, didn't you?

A: Eric Goldman was always a problem, he was a prima donna. My feeling was always that the White House didn't have room but for one prima donna, and that was the man who earned the right to be. I really didn't have much use for other people who needed their hands held, and Eric was one of those people. I never did have a great deal of respect for him.

B: He mentions that episode too in--

A: The presidential scholars?

B: Yes.

A: I didn't read that part, I don't know what he said about me then. But I know in his chapter on the Arts Council, I think I was the main villain, and I think maybe Mrs. Johnson was the next main villain even before the President, but I understand that in the rest of the book he had some terribly nice things to say about her. I'm afraid that Eric's ego got in the way of his historic perspective in talking about the Arts Festival.

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B: What did you think of his account of that? You said you had read that chapter of the book.

A: Number one, Eric takes that as his own idea, the brainstorm that had been bursting within his breast trying to find an outlet, lo, these many months since he had arrived at the White House. I don't detract from him for it because I think that he did have good thoughts, but he takes credit for that when I really think I deserve a lot of the credit for it. I had originally talked to the President and Mrs. Johnson about it before Eric ever got involved in it, and he brings me into it as when I came over to his office one afternoon and said: "Eric, we've just got to do something cultural!" He acts like I don't even know who John Hersey is. So the whole thing really leaves me sort of cold. Eric was a real bad egg in the whole thing. He says that he didn't know why the President delayed so long in planning the Arts Festival. He knows very well why the President delayed so long, because the President told us all why he delayed so long, and we knew it at the time!

B: What was the reason?

A: It was because of the war in Vietnam, and it was because the President had received some criticism for entertaining at all in the White House. A number of people thought we should have gone to the days of World War II when there was absolutely no entertaining in the White House at all. I didn't agree with that, and I don't think it was purely because I wouldn't have had anything to do if we had traveled that route. But a lot of people thought that Luci shouldn't have a big wedding purely because there was a war going on, and I know an awful lot of people felt that way.

B: What was the President's reaction as the Festival of the Arts began to be more and more troublesome?

A: His reaction was--I think Eric was accurate on this--to have less and less to do with it, and wondering why the hell he had gotten involved in it in the first place.

But the point is that the problems didn't have to come. The problems were basically created by Eric Goldman.

When the President finally went ahead with it, I guess I thought that I was in charge of it and Eric thought that he was in charge of it. I'm always somebody who tries to work with somebody else, and Eric had some marvelous, very, very good, useful ideas--marvelous, a lot of them a whale of a lot better than mine. He certainly knew the poets and the writers better than I did. But I would never have called Robert Lowell and asked him to participate in this. He was a conscientious objector in World War II, and if he was a conscientious objector in World War II, he would certainly have a problem with the President about this; and therefore, I wouldn't have selected him. When Eric told me he had called him, I just really nearly had a heart attack. I said, "You can't have!" He

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said, "No, no, you have it all wrong. Robert Lowell realizes what we're trying to do and he realizes that even though he doesn't agree with the President's foreign policy, that he's grateful for what he's doing in the arts, and therefore he wants to be a part of it."

Of course the next we heard, Robert Lowell had written a letter to the President and delivered it to the New York Times about a day before it reached the President.

B: Goldman describes a couple of occasions in which you and/or Mrs. Johnson talked to him about the guest list and the selections that "the guests will read," in the case of Arthur Miller and Hersey and Mark Van Doren. Were you talking on Mr. Johnson's instructions?

A: No. I wanted to do something that would be a plus for the Johnsons and a plus for the arts. I didn't see any need in giving a forum to people who were going to embarrass the President. I think, however, as it turned out, I did wish that the President had come to the Arts Festival and had given that day to it and had talked with these people informally; that he had walked around with John Hersey and talked with him informally. I do think that the President really made a mistake in shutting himself off from these people. I think that even if they didn't sell him on their point of view, that he could have given them an understanding of his problems that would have stayed with them longer. But when a man is president and he has got twenty-four hours in every day and he's got to sleep a few of them and he has got all these things coming at him from all different directions, and he says, "I don't have time to do that. Can't these people know that I just made a speech on television day before yesterday and said all these things!" But you just have to keep saying them. It's just like advertising Coca-Cola. When you get so you just can't stand it any more, I guess that's pretty good advertising--can't stand to hear it any more.

B: Did you or Mrs. Johnson or anyone else try to talk the President into spending more time there?

A: I don't know whether Mrs. Johnson did or not, I did unsuccessfully. And I think that maybe Jack Valenti tried to encourage him to spend more time there, but it was really a lost cause. I was glad that he came to the dinner that night.

And of course the credibility gap has always been with the White House or any other political office or any other business office. You tell white lies, and our white lie in that was that the President never had planned to be involved in anything else. I don't think the President, when he signs up to say, "Yes, you can have an arts festival at the White House," he doesn't simultaneously sign up to say, "and I will be there for twelve hours," from poetry readings through a jazz concert at the end.

Eric's whole approach to this was really different than mine. He looked on it not as a college seminar because that's low-rating the Arts Festival and low-rating what Eric thought of it, but that was more what he thought of it--a very free flowing sort of thing. I, on the other hand, looked at it as a tightly programmed piece of entertainment. It was too

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complicated not to have a tight schedule. The only people that he had contacted were the writers. I had gotten in touch with the drama groups and with the symphony group and with Duke Ellington and with the Joffrey Ballet, and had reached all the narrators who were to introduce the programs--except for Mark Van Doren, whom Eric had spoken with.

But Eric couldn't understand why we needed this rehearsal, and I tried to tell him that you can have a ballet troupe get up on a stage and not have rehearsed it on that stage and with that lighting and that music and then he understood that. And I said, "The same thing is true with the writers. They need to come here and see that stage and try out the microphone and see if the lights are shining in their eyes. This is the first thing on the schedule, and we want to do it right." And he said, no, he would have no part of it, and I said, "Well, with your permission I would like to call these people and not make it a requirement but to explain to them why we want to do it." Eric says, "You're just trying to get them down here so you can censor what they say!"

And each one that I called to ask if they could come down on Sunday before the festival to see the stage, test the microphone, check the stands, test the lights--each one was grateful and said so at the time of the call and on Sunday when they were there. Basically, they said, "I'm terribly nervous about this, and this will give me a much easier feeling."

When Mark Van Doren read his introduction on Sunday, I was really just sick at my stomach and sick at heart because his whole tone was more Robert Lowell. You could tell that he himself was in a way distressed about it. So I spoke to Eric after that and I said, I really think that you should--I hate to see the Arts Festival open this way. If it does, that's going to be the whole story of the day, and there are too many other wonderful things that are happening here, and it's probably going to be the whole story anyway; the whole Robert Lowell thing will be the lead of everybody's column, both in New York and in London, but I hate to see it start out on that vein."

Is that the time that Eric has me shaking my finger in his face and saying, "If you don't do something about that, I'll tell the Big Man on you," or something like that? Anyway, whatever he has me saying is so out of character with me that even if I was furious with him, I wouldn't have done it.

B: He does quote you on that occasion as saying that you had been charged by President Johnson to keep an eye on the festival.

A: He also says I was shaking my finger in his face.

B: I don't remember the rest of it, the exact words.

A: Eric said, yes, he thought that that was a good point, and he was going to go back to the

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hotel where the Van Dorns were staying over, at the Hay-Adams, and discuss it with him. And he did and Mr. Van Dorn did change the tone of his introduction.

B: As the public protest over the Vietnamese war increased, did that kind of problem show up in other parties and assembling guest lists for other occasions?

A: Absolutely. And of course we didn't always save ourselves from it, as you'll remember from the Eartha Kitt incident at Mrs. Johnson's Women Doers luncheon. But I used to clip out of the Sunday New York Times those full-page advertisements that were saying, "Dear Mr. President: You have killed so many North and South Vietnamese. How can you sleep at night," and signed by a long list of people, a lot of them in the entertainment world. It would have been very foolish on my part to invite someone to come and sing at the White House, or do a poetry reading at the White House, who had the month before or the week before signed one of those ads. In the first place, I think that the person who got the invitation would have been the most surprised individual of all. And it's one reason that we ended up having so much ballet toward the end. Every once in awhile somebody would say, "Gee, the President really likes ballet!" And I'd say, "Oh, yes, he likes that and music too." But the truth of the matter is that ballet dancers really generally don't have political opinions, and the rest of the world of the arts--certainly the folksingers and the actors--it wasn't chic to be in that world unless you were marching on the White House against the war in Vietnam.

I felt this with a number of my friends. I know that Peter, Paul, and Mary--the folksingers--spent an evening with Tyler and me, really late into the night after a concert of theirs. I think we wound up about four-thirty in the morning, talking about Vietnam. And they said at that time that they had not gone over to the other side, but how difficult it was for them because all of their friends, and even their manager, was really down on them about it.

B: That by performing in the White House they were subject to social pressures among their--?

A: No, because they did perform in the White House and they did some things for us in the campaign, but that was in 1964 and that was before it had really gotten chic to march on the White House and march on the Pentagon. This was about '66; I think it was '67 when Peter, Paul and Mary--

B: Was President Johnson aware of this--that may be a superfluous question, I assume he was aware of it--that you were having to apply that kind of standards to entertain?

A: I don't know. I assume that he was, but I never discussed it with him.

B: Other than that, what sort of criteria did you use for selecting the entertainment?

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A: I'd try and find out as much as I could about the guest of honor, what his interests were, what he was absolutely mad about, and then lean heavily on that. Mrs. Marcos, the wife of the President of the Philippines, was a singer herself, and she just loved to come to New York and see all the musical comedy. So for the Marcoses we did an evening of musical comedy--it was bits and pieces from about six shows, "Guys and Dolls" and "Pajama Game," that sort of thing. It was light and happy and they loved it.

Where there was a language problem, where the visitor didn't speak English, we would try and have something in a universal language; in other words, not have anything that depended upon the understanding of English in order to understand and in order to enjoy.

B: Did the President and Mrs. Johnson have any particular taste along the lines of entertainment?

A: Yes, they preferred musical comedy. Remember that entertainment at a State dinner is secondary to anything else that happens that night, it begins about ten-thirty at night after a day when President and Mrs. Johnson and their guests have gotten up early, spent a full day at the office, had a drink or two drinks before dinner, a four course meal and three wines. So it's not the time to give a serious concert. I always tried to explain to each of the artists, whether it was an opera singer or a musical comedy star or a violinist. "This is the timing. This is what your audience has done that day. Therefore, make it on the light side." Our programs never ran longer than half an hour, generally from fifteen to twenty-five minutes, not because we were trying to short-change the artist but because we wanted the guests to go away wishing for more and not saying to themselves, "If that program had been one aria shorter it would have been better." But to leave them wanting more.

B: I can't resist asking this. Did Bess Abell get to enjoy the parties?

A: Some of them I really enjoyed quite a lot, but I really didn't enjoy them until it was about time to wind them up because you were always thinking about all those little details, all those little things that go into rolling up the ball of wax.

B: Seating arrangements, for example, do you really have to follow a rigid protocol scheme and do people get upset if you don't?

A: Very seldom do people get upset. Of course I'm not sure that they'd come and tell me if they did. I had one lady who's the wife of a senator, a very lovely lady whom I've known for a long, long time, who's a very close friend of the President and Mrs. Johnson, and I had seated her next to the guest of honor with another gentleman on her right. She had stormed up to me just as the receiving line was breaking up and as the President was walking down the hall with his guest of honor. I thought it was really very unlike her. She said, "Bess, I won't sit where you've put me tonight!" I was a little bit aghast. I said,

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"Well, then, why did you come?" And she said, "I won't sit next to that man." I thought she was talking about the visiting President, and I was about ready to have heart failure. I said, "What is the problem? Bear in mind that here the man comes down the hall." She said, "Not him, that other man I'm sitting next to." I couldn't even remember who it was. Her husband had just been through a campaign and had been defeated for the Senate, and she said, "He contributed X-number of thousand dollars to my husband's opponent," and I understood how she felt. But I just said, "Now look, they're coming down the hall. What do you want to do? Do you want to get sick and drop out? I can move you some place else, but somebody will want to know why. Why don't you be a good sport about it?" And she was. I told her that I would remember now and never invite them at the same time.

We also, with guests, ended up with a man and his new wife and his ex-wife at the same party two particular times; once, when Roberta Peters was a guest. Let's see, she was invited as a guest, and I've forgotten now what happened with the entertainment, but my entertainment program I guess fell apart at the last minute and I had to put something together again on short notice. And who did I call on! I called on Bob Merrill. He and a group of madrigal singers from the University of Maryland at a Christmas party sang a series of Christmas carols at one of the prettiest State dinners we ever had. But he was there with Roberta Peters.

B: Someone may not know this in the future. Miss Peters is the former Mrs. Merrill.

A: The former Mrs. Merrill, yes.

And then Joan Crawford was a guest at the White House for a dinner honoring the Speaker, the Vice President, and the Chief Justice, with her ex-husband Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. That was my mistake; if it was a problem for anybody, that was my mistake, because I had forgotten about it. When I was reminded it came back to me. But Joan Crawford kept sending him notes during the party, getting one of the butlers to take him notes.

B: Did you deliberately try to have an atmosphere of informality at the parties? I believe you generally used the small round tables rather than the more formal long tables.

A: Yes, you asked about the seating. Yes, there is a hard and fast protocol list. But we solved that problem and what I think is a colossal problem for the enjoyment of your guests--but which the Nixons have gone back to-- which is that long, long table where everybody who has a title sits at the center of the table and everybody who is without title but equally interesting, if not more so, sits down at the far ends of the table. The whole thing about entertaining is to make your guests welcome, to make them feel as much at home as possible, which is not always easy to do in the first house of the land. Entertaining there is always going to be different from any place else, no matter who the president is. You can't walk into that house without remembering that thirty-five

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presidents and their families have lived there before.

But by the use of the round tables I think that we got the best of both worlds. Each table--say the tables hold ten guests--would have a host or a hostess or sometimes both, and for those people you pull from your rank! Cabinet members, State Department people, congressional people. And then you let them sit next to a movie star or a businessman, and everybody enjoys it more because everybody feels like they've been a part of the evening.

B: Did President and Mrs. Johnson enjoy the social occasions, or did they make an effort to appear to enjoy them?

A: I think that they almost always enjoyed them, some of them they enjoyed a lot more than others. I asked Mrs. Johnson what were the differences--

[interruption]

Occasionally for a State dinner we would have a long head table, where we would seat about twenty people, and then we would have twelve round tables for ten. But at that head table you really have to use your rank there, because one movie star doesn't understand why the other one was there and he wasn't; or one businessman doesn't understand why that businessman outranked him. So you're stuck with using your rank there, and I asked her once, what difference it made to her in the enjoyment of an evening to sit at a long formal table or a small round table. And she said that when she had a really marvelous guest of honor, a prime minister that she loved talking to, that she much, much preferred the round table because he could become more a part of the conversation of the whole table. But she said where she had a man who was really difficult to talk with, difficult to converse with, difficult to entertain, that it really didn't make that much difference because it was such a struggle, whether she was at the small round table, that she spent all of her time with him and not that much time talking across the table.

But I think the President always enjoyed the round tables more.

B: Mrs. Abell, what have we left to cover? I've just about run out of questions.

Baker: Note added after the interview was over: there were no more questions, or at least no more answers, and the whole series of interviews ended.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview III]

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