

INTERVIEWEE: MRS. LLOYD BENTSEN, JR.

INTERVIEWER: DAVID G. MC COMB

December 23, 1968, 330 Inwood Drive, Houston, Texas

M: First of all, Mrs. Bentsen, I would like to know something about your background--where were you born and when.

B: I was born in Lufkin, Texas--I'm a native Texan--born there in 1922.

M: And where did you get your education?

B: I finished high school in Lufkin, and then I had two years at the Texas State College for Women, and then one year at Texas University, and a half-term at the University of Colorado. But winding up as a mid-year student, unfortunately I never went back for that last four-and-a-half months.

M: Then what did you do when you left college?

B: After leaving college, I went to New York and lived up there for about two years and married. And then my husband and I--I always say that I was also in the service, but we were in the service for awhile--and he went overseas, and I came back to Texas to live with his family.

M: As I recall you were married in 1943.

B: Married in 1943 in Columbus, Mississippi.

M: And your husband was in politics at the time?

B: No, not at the time. He was going through flight training. He had been an intelligence officer in Brazil and then he came back to the States and went through flight training, and then we were stationed in the Southeastern Command which is Montgomery, Alabama, and Columbus and Atlanta. Then he went overseas, and I came to live with his family.

So after the war, he came back to Texas. And after living in McAllen about ten months, he ran for County Judge and was elected and served out that term; before the end of the term, [he] ran for Congress, and was elected to the Congress in '48. He went up at the time that Truman had the very surprising victory over Dewey.

M: That's right. That was the 80th Congress.

B: Yes. No, we went into the 81st. But our Congressman had passed away that was serving the district, and even though my husband had already been elected, they just chose him to fill the unexpired term.

M: I see. So he got in on the very last of the 80th.

B: Of the 80th, yes.

M: And then served his own full term in the 81st?

B: Yes.

M: And your husband remained a Congressman then for how long?

B: We were there six years, and he retired in '54.

M: Is it about this period of time that you first met Lyndon Johnson?

B: We first met him in the fall of 1948. We had known of him, had many mutual friends. And we were at the country club playing golf, and he and Mrs. Johnson were in the club with some friends of ours.

M: Which country club was this?

B: This was the McAllen Country Club. And so, we walked by the window and his friends saw us and came out and got us and took us in to meet the President and Mrs. Johnson. And we've been very close friends since.

M: Were you impressed at this first meeting with the Johnsons?

B: You know, he was campaigning for the Senate, I believe--I'm not real certain--but I think maybe he was campaigning for the Senate at that particular time, and he seemed like such a relaxed individual. He was in

a club and there were a great number of people. You know, he just couldn't walk into a room, seemingly, that he didn't want to go around and meet everyone and shake their hands, and I had just rather assumed that this is what the President should be doing. But he was not campaigning at that moment. He was just relaxing and enjoying himself.

M: Did your husband have any dealings with Lyndon Johnson when your husband was a Congressman?

B: They had many bills that were pertinent to legislation that affected South Texas, and any time that there was any question about whether they might pass the Senate or not, my husband always felt very free to call then-Senator Johnson and tell him that he was interested in some particular legislation that would be affecting his district, and he would very much appreciate it if he would see that it would be passed.

M: Did you have any contact with the Johnsons when you were in Washington?

B: We saw them socially, just regularly. We went over to their home almost every Sunday afternoon. They loved having people over and always had a group around. It wasn't a large group by any means. Sometimes it would be Chief Justice [Fred M.] Vinson and almost always Speaker Sam Rayburn; and sometimes Stewart Symington would be there and sometimes Herbert Hoover, but there would generally be no more than six or eight of us. Bob Kerr was there quite often. I don't know why we wound up over there so regularly, but we did and just thoroughly enjoyed it.

M: Was the conversation invariably on politics?

B: Almost always. They would listen to Drew Pearson. Everyone had to stop talking until Drew Pearson had finished his broadcast, and then they would talk about what he had said on his particular show. I never felt that the man deserved to have the power that he seemed to have, but, you know, the

pen being mightier than the sword, they really listened to him.

M: And then would they discuss what Drew Pearson had to say?

B: They would discuss what he had to say. Quite often they would discuss maybe the legislation that was coming up before the floor, and regularly they would discuss where the votes were and who was going to be for them and who was going to be against them, and where the undecided votes were and whether they thought they could influence someone into going with them.

M: At these Sunday meetings and so on, did the women talk about politics too?

B: Well, we listened. I thought it was very interesting, and Mrs. Johnson has always just been able to come up with this marvelous feast without any show of effort whatsoever. And sometimes it would be early afternoon; you know, we might go at four, four-thirty, five o'clock with no thought of staying through the dinner hour. Then if the President became interested in what was being discussed and wanted to pursue it a little bit further, he would say, "Bird, go in and fix us something to eat." And she would go in and we'd have wonderful things, but seemingly without any effort.

M: Did you ever do any campaigning for Lyndon Johnson?

B: I know that I have--yes, of course, I have, I was trying to think of trips--I was thinking of distant places. I have done work in the offices at different areas in the Rio Grande Valley, mostly in McAllen. And then even after we moved up here, at a precinct level there were petitions at one time that were presented that wanted to permit him to run for the Senate and for Vice President at the same time, I believe. Now, I rather think that's what the situation was. And so my husband presented this petition to our precinct to be voted on, and I gave a coffee at one point

here in Houston. We had a film made showing how one could conduct a precinct meeting, you know, educational films of that sort, that were on his behalf and were listed as being given for him.

M: More conversely, did he ever help your husband in his campaigns?

B: No, at the time when my husband was running for Congress, he had a very hard race, his first race. There were many men in the race, and we did not have an incumbent. I mentioned that Congressman [Milton H.] West had died, and so that was a very difficult race because the field was large. But after that my husband never had an opponent.

M: So he had no great difficulties in his races?

B: None. He didn't have a Democrat or a Republican opponent.

M: Was your husband, in his politics at the time, considered a conservative or what?

B: I don't think he would be classified in one particular category on everything. It more or less depended on the issue as to how he looked at it.

M: Did your husband participate to any great extent in state politics?

B: He has always been interested in candidates, and has always contributed to the support of a particular candidate. He has sponsored dinners and has acted as master of ceremonies for different dinners. He has been on welcoming committees and, you know, formed the motorcades and gotten the people to the auditoriums and that type of thing. So he has been active.

M: Did he support Allan Shivers?

B: Yes, he did. They are very good friends.

M: He did support Allan Shivers then when Shivers was governor?

B: Yes.

M: Well, then, does it follow that he was against Stevenson when Adlai

Stevenson ran for the Presidency?

B: No, I don't believe that one could say he was against him. When he was running for the Presidency, my husband at that time was campaigning in his race, and the situation at that time was somewhat different to what it is now. We were very democratic in the state, and so every man more or less ran his own race. We didn't receive any funds from a national committee or any national group whatsoever to help my husband finance his campaign. And I think that this was pretty much the pattern throughout the state. On the national level we were ignored because we were democratic. They knew that a Democrat would come to the Congress. We were not particularly important to the national level. And as a result they, in turn, didn't necessarily campaign for the national ticket.

M: The reason I bring that up is that according to the books Shivers was against Adlai Stevenson and tried to lead Texas Democrats in favor of Dwight Eisenhower.

B: Yes, well, it is well known that he--

M: So I was just wondering whether your husband went along with Shivers on this, or whether he went ahead and supported Adlai Stevenson.

B: I think he voted the Democratic ticket. I'm pretty sure that he did. But at the time that the President and Allan Shivers were having a disagreement about who was going to lead the Democrats at the convention, the Texas state convention, my husband was among those that really did not want to see them quarrel and get into a fight over this particular question. And he sort of acted as liaison between the two. He would talk to one and then would go and talk with the other; and finally I think had a meeting with the two. I think he arranged for them to have a meeting, but they could not agree.

M: When was this that your husband was working as liaison between the two?

B: Let's see, when did Governor Shivers first bolt the Democratic party?
What year was that?

M: 1952, when Eisenhower ran the first time.

B: Well, it was probably that first summer of '52. Maybe that's when all of their disagreement began.

M: In 1956, there was an apparent attempt to oust Shivers in Texas. Again, according to the books, Lyndon Johnson allied himself with liberals in Texas to do this. And this came into a fight in the Texas state political conventions, one in the spring of '56, the other in the fall of '56. Is that essentially correct from your point of view?

B: Yes, I think that is pretty much what happened. Of course, there were Democrats of all beliefs, I suppose you could say, but certainly those who had worked on a national level just felt that it was important to work within the Democratic party, that you don't necessarily gain anything by turning around and supporting somebody else. This switching back and forth, you see, if you are going to be a Republican, you should say that you are and then be one. But I've never seen anything to be gained by being a Democrat for a Republican candidate.

M: At that convention in May 1956, did you go to that convention as a delegate?

B: Yes.

M: A delegate from where?

B: From the Rio Grande Valley.

M: The liberals apparently led by Mrs. Randolph were supposedly very strong at that point in time. Is that correct?

B: Yes, they obviously were; as you look back on it, that certainly is true. Mrs. Weinert (?) had announced rather suddenly and unexpectedly that she

was not going to seek the position of National Committeewoman again. So about two days before the convention, I received a telephone call asking if I would consider taking the position, and I asked if there was any problem about seeking it.

M: Can you tell me who made the telephone call to you, who called?

B: No, I honestly can't remember.

M: Was it a representative of Lyndon Johnson?

B: Yes, it was, and it rather seems to me that it could have been John Connally.

M: But someone from his staff?

B: I just don't remember. I don't know why. I think the call was directed to my husband. Perhaps that's why it isn't clear in my mind. Yes, I'm certain that that is what happened. He came home and asked me if I would be interested in acting as Texas National Committeewoman, and I had some questions about how much time it involved and whether there was any problem that I might meet, and any sort of opposition in the convention, and everything. He said he did not think so, and after thinking about it for awhile, I decided that perhaps I would seek the position.

So then we got to Dallas or Ft. Worth--I think it was in Dallas, maybe at the fairgrounds--and there was just a terrible fight among the conservative and liberal Democrats, and the liberal Democrats had not been seated. They were the ones that had rumped their own conventions in their respective precincts and had brought all of these extra delegations to be heard in Dallas.

So just as we were ready to present my name, this was early in the morning, we were ready to present my name to the convention for a vote, some man broke into the hall and ran down and grabbed a microphone and just

disrupted the entire convention. So after much shouting and pushing and everything, they recessed the convention so that the credentials [committee] could hear all of the contesting delegations. This took most of the day, and it was well into the next morning, about one or one-thirty the next morning, when they again had--all delegations were seated. By that time, there wasn't anyone left on the floor except the liberals.

M: Was the man who disrupted the convention--did he do this intentionally, for that purpose?

B: Oh, definitely.

M: So as to bring about the recess so the fight could continue?

B: And it would give them time to organize their forces; and they were well organized, and did take over the convention.

M: I see.

B: And because of this, it was my thought that perhaps it would be a group that I would not particularly enjoy working with, so I asked that my name be withdrawn and not be presented to the convention.

M: And was this done?

B: And this was done. And then a nomination was made on the floor on Mrs. Randolph's behalf.

M: And then, of course, she was elected and went on to become the National Committeewoman.

The books about this talk about a deal being made between Lyndon Johnson and the liberals whereby they would select the committeeman and he would select the committeewoman and that when it came down to the choice he had selected you, but the liberals refused to honor this.

B: I don't believe there's any truth in fact to that statement. I read that in a book someone brought to me maybe from the University Library. And

the decision was my own not to be presented.

M: You mean the withdrawal of your name--you decided to do it?

B: Yes, it was my very own.

M: You weren't asked to withdraw it?

B: Oh, no.

M: I see. And as far as you know, there was no bargain between Lyndon Johnson and the liberals?

B: Not to my knowledge. I have no information on that at all.

M: I see. Did you happen to attend the convention that fall?

B: No, I didn't.

M: That's the one in which the liberals in Harris County, with Mrs. Randolph in the group, failed to be seated. But you were not at that convention?

B: No, I wasn't at that convention. We were still living in the Valley at that time.

M: I see. Did you continue your interest in Texas politics after this?

B: Yes, I have always been interested in politics. It isn't that I campaign on a whole ticket level, I normally have some very good friend that I am interested in, and so I campaign for individuals--work rather hard for them.

M: Did you remain friends with Allan Shivers after this--in 1956?

B: Yes, we are still very good friends.

M: Well, did he ever forgive Lyndon Johnson?

B: I don't really know that I have seen them together since that time, and I do not know that Governor Shivers has been to the White House. These are things that politicians normally have a tendency to forgive. Very few of them hold grudges. When they have a fight, they like to win it, but it's necessary to work with everyone, and I think most of them realize that; and so if they lose one time, then they hope that maybe the next

time they'll win that one.

M: Well, now, what has been your connection with Lyndon Johnson after this 1956 convention? Has it been on purely a social level or what?

B: On a social level. We've travelled with them, have gone hunting with them, and they've come hunting with us.

M: Have you been a delegate to any of the national Democratic conventions?

B: Yes, I was this year.

M: You were this year--the one in Chicago.

B: Yes.

M: Let me ask you this then, about Chicago. Do you feel that the debate on the platform was adequate at the Chicago convention?

B: Are you speaking of the platform itself?

M: About Viet Nam in particular.

B: Well, I just don't know how you arrive at a platform as a party on a situation that is really not within your control. I just think it's obvious that we all want peace. When it is stated in the simplest of terms, I think is really the best.

M: There is the story that Lyndon Johnson tried to run that 1968 convention from the White House and to direct it. Did you notice anything to substantiate this?

B: Nothing whatsoever. I saw Mr. Daley many, many times during the convention at meetings that we had and everything, and he made any number of statements any number of times to the press that he was running that convention.

M: As far as you know then, the stories about Lyndon Johnson behind the scenes are false?

B: I just didn't see it at all.

M: In your social connections with the President and Mrs. Johnson, have you

been impressed with anything in particular about them?

B: I think they are two of the most generous people I have ever known. I find it quite remarkable that both of them can be the friend to the number of people that they are. Their capacity for developing friendships with people all over the world, I think, is just most unusual.

M: Mr. Johnson is supposed to be a rather chivalrous man to ladies. Is that true?

B: Well, he's just very kind and very nice.

M: He's also noted for having a rather quick temper. Have you seen any evidence of that?

B: Yes, I've seen that too. It make him quite normal.

M: You think that makes him more of a human being?

B: Right.

M: Were you surprised at his decision not to run in 1968?

B: I was tremendously surprised.

M: And what was that? Why were you surprised?

B: Well, I know that it's my thought that his wanting to be President had more or less been his political aim, and it had taken him many years to achieve this goal; and he had gone about it in a proper manner of having experience in the other branch of government and developing leadership and knowledge of affairs and everything. So after having looked toward a goal for that long, I could hardly believe that he would give it up after so short a period of service. Politics has been his life, and he's still a young man. And it seemed to me that there was just so much more time for him to be political, I just didn't know why he was leaving. I didn't understand why he was leaving.

M: Has he ever had occasion to explain why he made that choice?

- B: No, I haven't asked him about it.
- M: Apparently Lyndon Johnson is quite persuasive when in a small group of people, and yet he fails to be so persuasive in talking to a mass audience. Is this true?
- B: I think that it certainly is the general consensus that he is not a strong public speaker as such, and it's unfortunate that most people haven't had the opportunity to see him at his best, which is talking to a small group.
- M: Do you have any idea why he fails to communicate, say, over television like he does with a small group?
- B: No, there is really nothing that I can put my finger on. I really don't know why that is. I know that he is sincere in what he is saying, he believes in what he is saying, but for some reason it just fails to be dramatic. I think it's lacking in drama or something that would have a tendency to sway people.
- M: I have exhausted the questions I had for you. Let me ask you an open-ended question. Are there any other comments that you would like to make for the record about Lyndon Johnson and Mrs. Johnson, and your relationship with them?
- B: I really feel that it has been a wonderful experience for my husband and myself to have known them. They have known our children and have been extremely kind to them; have remembered us in so many little ways that just always warms our hearts. I will never forget when President Kennedy came to Houston, we were supposed to have been on the welcoming committee, and my husband had to be in Lincoln, Nebraska, on business; and I was going to fly to New York the next morning and meet him, so I didn't go to meet the President without him. I just stayed home. Well, the Johnsons called and ^{said} ~~say~~ that they had missed us and wondered where we

were and why we weren't there. So I told them that Lloyd was busy and everything. Of course, I suppose it was the next day that President Kennedy was assassinated--that was on the 22nd. And our wedding anniversary is on the 27th, and they called us from Washington in this interim, in these few days, with all that had been happening to them, and the move, and the fact that he had stepped into the Presidency and all of a sudden the tighter guard and all of this that had taken place, and they called us on the night of our wedding anniversary to wish us a happy anniversary.

M: That's only five days later.

B: Only five days later. So even had they just thought of it and at some later point said, "Well, we thought of you on your anniversary," that would have just amazed me, but the fact that they called us on the telephone was so indicative of their thoughtfulness.

I would like to tell of another incident. Our daughter was Norwegian by birth, and we had to pass this special bill through the House and the Senate and the President signed it all on the same day for her to come into this country. So President Johnson among all the other Senators had been calling her their little girl, all the Senators. So he hadn't seen Tina in quite a few years. He'd seen the older boys, but hadn't seen Tina.

This past summer or spring the Choralettes, which is a local group here at Lamar, went to Washington, and they were going to have a tour of the White House, just a normal tour. Well, we just dropped a note to the President saying that the group was going to be up, and we thought it would be nice if they could have that Congressional tour which is just a little bit earlier and a little bit smaller. Not only did Mrs. Johnson come down, welcome the girls, and ask for my daughter, but in a few

moments, here came the President, greeted all of the girls, asked for my daughter, took all of the girls up to the third floor in the family living quarters. My daughter was on cloud--well, all of the girls were just on cloud nine. They had just never had such a wonderful thing happen to them. But now this was a very kind thing, you see, for those two very busy people who just see people all the time, never have a moment to even sit down and think quietly; and yet they still do all of these wonderful things that are so much beyond anyone else's capacity. So much more than I ever do for people. So you can see why we are so fond of them.

M: Yes, I can see that. Well, do you have anything else to add?

B: No, I don't.

M: Then I wish to thank you for taking the time for this interview.

B: Thank you very much.

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