

INTERVIEWEE: DOROTHY VREDENBURGH BUSH

INTERVIEWER: T. H. BAKER

February 13, 1969

Ba: This is the interview with Dorothy Vredenburg Bush. Mrs. Bush, just for identification purposes, you were born and reared in Mississippi, and graduated from Mississippi State College for Women in 1937, and became active in Democratic politics. Then in the 1940's, you became the first woman secretary of the Democratic National Committee, and secretary of the Democratic National Conventions--both since 1944.

Bu: That's right.

Ba: Mrs. Bush, do you recall when you first met Lyndon Johnson?

Bu: As far as I remember, it was probably right about in 1941 when I was active in Democratic party politics in the State of Alabama, and I came here to Washington for various fund-raising dinners. Back in those days we had the twenty-five-dollar-a-plate dinner which just seemed fantastic in those days. Of course look what has happened to them since that time.

But during those years, I met not only Lyndon Johnson but also the very great Sam Rayburn. Mr. Rayburn was one of my very favorite people of all times. Actually I would say that one of the main reasons that I was asked originally to become the secretary of the Democratic National Committee is because of my devotion to Mr. Rayburn. Actually he had been an idol of mine, more or less, and I felt that he, or a man like Mr. Rayburn, would make a great vice presidential candidate with the late President Roosevelt. I, in my capacity as vice president of the

Young Democratic Clubs of America, spoke out quite loudly for either Sam Rayburn himself, or a man like him to be our candidate. We didn't get him, but we did get Harry Truman rather than Henry Wallace. And it was during those years that I first met and knew our great President Lyndon Johnson.

Ba: What was Mr. Rayburn's attitude toward the vice presidential nomination?

Bu: I think it sort of appealed to him, but I don't think he ever actually sought the vice presidential nomination. But it was because I thought like Mr. Rayburn thought, I believe, is one of the reasons. Of course, I was quite, quite young at that time. And, being a lady, the people who were the head of the Democratic Party in those years realized that they should recognize the young people's vote as well as the women's vote. I feel sure that those were two of the reasons that I was asked to serve. Of course I was appointed to begin with by Rod Hannegan. Then I was elected by the full membership of the national committee at the first meeting following my appointment.

Ba: In those days, as you said, you were active with the Young Democrats first, and Mr. Johnson had sort of broken into national politics as the appointed National Youth Director in Texas. Did he continue an interest in youth activities? Was he directly involved with, say, the Young Democrats back in those Congressional days?

Bu: I wouldn't say too much so, but he never forgot the value of the young people in this great country. Evidence his great programs for education and even down to the Head Start preschool children--the children even before voting age--and as you say, his youth program in Texas.

Ba: Did you see anything in those days of the relationship between Mr.

Johnson and Mr. Rayburn?

Bu: Well, that they were just great admirers of each other--each in his own field, each in his own bailiwick.

Ba: By the time of Mr. Johnson's election to the Senate in '48, you were and had been for some years in your position on the committee. Did the national committee get involved in his '48 election in Texas?

Bu: I was not spending very much time actually in headquarters in those years, and I could not take an affidavit either way. I just don't know.

The time I got closest to the Johnsons would have been in the campaign in 1960. I was privileged to actually come here to Washington and more or less head up the women in the South for the Vice Presidential candidate Lyndon Johnson--and then enjoyed very much the trip through the South with the Johnsons.

Ba: Did you get involved before the convention in any of the preliminary races for the nomination in '60?

Bu: No. You know, actually you can't do that in my job as secretary of the committee. I have always stayed out of what you are referring to would be the primary or preconvention races. It's a little difficult, I must admit, because I like campaigning; and to have to stay away from it, back off, is pretty difficult. But I've managed pretty well.

Ba: I've wondered about that. I know that the ethics of the situation require that the Democratic National Committee people remain nonpartisan within the party, but it must be a temptation at times.

Bu: They don't all do it, I don't mind telling you. But if that's what they want to do, that's fine. But I am an elected official of the Democratic National Committee, and I am elected by the one hundred and ten members--

a man and woman from each of the States and the territories. Therefore I feel it is my obligation to, as nearly as possible, stay out of the races until the nomination at the convention.

Ba: Before we get into the '60 campaign, this pertains to more-or-less directly national committee business. In the late '50's--after 1958 when Paul Butler was chairman--there was created the Democratic Advisory Council as a policy matter which was not too well thought of apparently by Mr. Rayburn and Mr. Johnson.

Bu: I was extremely sad about that. I was not consulted on it, and I felt that had I been that there just could have been some heartache avoided. That sounds egotistical for me to say that, but I would have never, never under any circumstances got up a committee without clearing it with both Speaker Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson. They're just great. President Johnson is a great man, and the late Speaker Rayburn was a great man. And there's room in our Democratic part for all of these various factions; and we need the advice of all of these marvelous people.

Ba: Where did the idea for that committee originate?

Bu: I think it was strictly in Chairman [Paul] Butler's mind. It came as a shock to me. Even now when people bring it up, I think how did that ever happen that way. It brought some really rough times for a lot of the people on the committee. I was sorry that it happened the way it did.

Ba: I understand that it was publicly known that Mr. Rayburn and Mr. Johnson--well, I guess--just ignored it is about the best way to describe it.

Bu: They weren't asked to advise on it, as I understood the whole situation. I think they had a right to sort of say, "Well, gee, if that's the way he wants to handle it, just let him do it that way." But they

weren't happy about it, and a lot of other people were very unhappy.

In my opinion the new chairman of the national committee, Fred Harris, has named two new commissions which were mandated by our last convention, and I really think that he has done a superb job of bringing in all of the various groups who belong in the Democratic party. I think that they will work together, and that great good will come from both of these new committees.

Ba: I gather that, in the late '50's there, when Mr. Butler was chairman it was not just that it was an advisory committee, but that it represented mostly a certain segment of the party, generally the liberal segment.

Bu: And that's a very important section, but it's not the only section of our party.

Ba: I've heard that for a time there Mr. Butler and Matt McCloskey in the committee just weren't even speaking to each other out of this issue.

Bu: There again I couldn't take an affidavit to it, but I'm afraid you and I have talked to some of the same people.

Ba: I think perhaps that we should point out for the benefit of anyone using this, your position doesn't require you to be resident in Washington and in the office all the time.

Bu: That is correct.

Ba: It might be misunderstood. That sounds like it might be a position where you're there all the time and it really isn't that kind of job.

Bu: And I'd like to point out too, Dr. Baker, that I am strictly a volunteer. I have never been on the payroll. I have had a few expenses for travel and things of that kind--when I've been strictly on committee business--either taken care of by the state I was visiting officially or by the

national committee, when I was on business for them.

Ba: And your other position as secretary of the conventions--you do attend the conventions and call the roll?

Bu: Yes. And I have a lot of responsibility at the conventions. It's my responsibility to get together the official lists of the delegates and alternates to the convention from all the States, and then the compilation of the membership of the various committees that work within the convention--the Rules Committee, the Platform Committee, the permanent organization, and the committees of that nature.

Ba: Back to 1960, the convention at which Mr. Kennedy was nominated for President and then Mr. Johnson for Vice President--did you have any personal loyalties at that one? Obviously the ethics of your position--

Bu: No. You know, frankly, I've stayed out of it very well. It has been hard. But, I think as a result, I've worked much harder from the time the convention is over until the election, because so many of our leaders and our workers are just almost exhausted by the time the convention is over with and have to take a holiday before they can start in on the convention, whereas I have tried to stay out of the so-called little factions and fights within the party framework. I'm all excited and ready to "go to town" on the campaign itself.

Ba: At the '60 convention there was almost--or at least from an outsider's standpoint--it looked like there was almost a small floor revolt against the nomination of Mr. Johnson. Was that difficult to head off?

Bu: There were some great problems there, and there were some delegations that were not as completely sold on the Vice Presidential candidate as others. But these little problems happen at every convention. You

can't satisfy absolutely everybody within the party. It's a part of life itself, I suppose.

Ba: And then after the '60 convention, you headed the Women for--?

Bu: I was in the Southern headquarters. In fact, many friends called it the "You-all" division here in Washington. I did come up, and we had our headquarters set up over near the Capitol. I was more or less in charge of the women in the South for Lyndon Johnson for Vice President.

Ba: Who thought of the idea of the train through the South?

Bu: This is something that had been coming along for a long time--like Truman had done such a good job on the back of the train with whistle-stops and so forth. Then we did need the South very definitely in our column in November, so we thought that we could reach the greatest number of people by actually planning the trip just through the South. It was a good deal.

Ba: Did you make the arrangements for that trip?

Bu: I helped to, yes.

Ba: Did you have any difficulty in any of the Southern states getting the proper political leaders to ride through the state with you?

Bu: No. They worked that out nicely. I suppose you have other people who have discussed this. The leaders from the next city down the road would come up the morning before or the afternoon before. They would come aboard the train and visit with the candidate and Mrs. Johnson between that town and their hometown. Then when we would stop in their hometown, they would get off the train. The people from the next city would have driven up and would come aboard, and that would give them an hour maybe between towns to visit and then get off at their hometown.

So it worked out very nicely. I think the whole thing was well-organized and well-run.

Ba: How was Mrs. Johnson as a campaigner?

Bu: Great, just great! She's just a fine lady, and I think her projects have all been quite well done. I think she will certainly go down in history as one of our greatest First Ladies.

Ba: In campaigns, does Mr. Johnson just kind of let her have her head--trust her own independent political judgment? Or do they work together on campaign tactics and strategy?

Bu: Knowing the two of them as well as I do, I feel sure that she would discuss what she had in mind doing--as any good wife discusses plans with her husband. I think that they're that near normal, you know--just like the rest of us. Rarely does the lady go off on some project without at least discussing it with her husband. I think as busy as he always was, that he would have always found time to discuss her thinking, also.

Ba: Did you have any contact with the Johnsons during the years he was the Vice President?

Bu: Just the usual coming and going. I remember that Jack and I had been married, and we decided that we'd have a very large party. We thought it would be nice if we could invite the Vice President and Mrs. Johnson. She accepted right away, and said that the Vice President hoped that he might be able to join us, but that he wouldn't be certain until the late afternoon probably of the party. So we were holding this party at the Woman's National Democratic Club. Sure enough, late in the afternoon, the Secret Service called me and said they would like to have the copy of the guest list. Of course, I was thrilled that they would come.



They did, and it was a great thing for us to be able to have them as guests.

Ba: Does Mr. Johnson enjoy himself at parties?

Bu: Always.

Ba: He seems to like them very much.

Bu: Yes. He's a delightful person.

Ba: You were in Washington here at the time of the assassination of President Kennedy, weren't you?

Bu: Yes, I was living here at that time. I was not actually in Washington. I was in Ohio on a visit with my husband to his family. There was to be a wedding in Portsmouth, Ohio-- Ironton, actually. A nephew of Jack's was being married the following day. So we were actually there, but certainly came right home.

Ba: Did you see the Johnsons any time immediately after their transition period?

Bu: Not in close contact with them.

Ba: At the '64 convention, you may have been involved in one of the things that went on there. That convention went so smoothly, except for the controversy over the seating of the Mississippi delegation--where the compromise was worked out between the Regular party and the Freedom Democratic party. Did you have anything to do with working out the compromise?

Bu: No, I did not. There again, I will say that the training I had had in the past years in conventions of staying out of primaries I feel served me well in being able to stay out completely of that controversy.

Inasmuch as I had been born in Mississippi, I felt that I shouldn't let

any personal feelings involve me in the particular fight that they were conducting at this time. I had not been a resident of the State of Mississippi for quite a long time, and I had had nothing to do with their getting into the controversy, so I didn't feel that I should try to undo it, so I stayed completely out of it.

Ba: Probably the wisest course to take in that kind of thing.

Bu: I think by all means that it was. Let's go back even beyond that to the '48 one when the Alabama delegation walked out--remember?

Ba: Yes.

Bu: I, there, just stayed out. I was younger then, and as I recall, it was a little more emotional as far as I was concerned. I had been closer to it and, of course, I was still a resident of the State of Alabama. But there again I had not had anything to do with creating the controversy, so I did manage to stay out of that one, also.

Ba: During the years of Johnson's Presidency, do you feel that the Democratic National Committee has been kept as finely honed in organization as it should be? Some people have said that it has sort of fallen into disuse in the years before '68.

Bu: It's extremely difficult to draw a line as to just where everything should be done as far as the Democratic party is concerned. When the Democrats are in power and we have the Administration and we're in the White House, naturally the President is the head of the party and the leadership must come and does come from him. So I wouldn't want to say that it was beginning to fall apart or that bad things were happening at the national committee. Yet a lot of people were inclined to say those things. I'm sure that the President wanted the party to stay

active and to stay firm and strong and do everything to help him carry out his programs because he couldn't do those things alone. You see, I lived through the Eisenhower years too.

And, actually, President Kennedy did a great deal of the running of the things at the national committee from his White House office, you know, the setup there in the Executive office. But maybe had President Kennedy lived longer and been the President for a longer period, people might have started to say that he was running too much of the committee from the White House--as with Johnson.

Ba: That must be an awkward--well, not awkward-situation, but one in which you just sort of have to play it by ear. The President, if he is of your party, is after all the head of the party. And the committee is to some extent his instrument.

Bu: Absolutely.

Ba: I suppose, too, you must have at least tried to stay out of the intra-party affairs of the early part of this year.

Bu: Surely. You know, actually, Senator Fred Harris happens to be the tenth chairman with whom I've been privileged to serve as an elected official of the Democratic National Committee. Many people were saying to me, "Well, do you think a Senator can--It should be a full-time job," and all this.

I said, "Well, after all, Howard McGrath was the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and he was at the time a United States Senator." Then, of course, during the campaign of 1960--at that time and up until the time that President Kennedy went in as the President in January of '61--Senator Jackson was the chairman of the Democratic

National Committee.

Ba: Yes. And Mr. Harris seems to have taken hold and gotten things moving along there.

Bu: Yes. He is a believer in young people. I think he's a believer that there's room in our party for all these various factions, and he wants to get us all together as nearly as possible.

Ba: Have you on the committee had any prior indication or even hint that Mr. Johnson was going to withdraw last spring?

Bu: No. It came as a real surprise. I couldn't believe it. I simply couldn't believe it!

Ba: There has been some thought that maybe Mrs. Johnson helped influence the decision.

BU: Being a wife, I can say that maybe I am inclined to agree with Mrs. Johnson. They're a great all-American family. I think they've done a tremendous job with their two daughters. I think that Mrs. Johnson possibly felt that he had given such a long number of years to the party and to the country that now they were entitled to some time with a little less strenuous schedule so that they might enjoy each other.

They're not going to stop being a benefit to mankind. Just this noon I heard that the President had accepted a four-year membership on the Mayo Clinic board of trustees, I believe it was. I just heard it on the radio in passing more or less. But there is evidence of his real interest in mankind, medicine, advancement of things for all of us. So he isn't going to stop any more than she is going to doing good things for all the people.

Ba: Did you find this summer's Democratic convention any more difficult than

those in the past? There has been quite a lot of writing about the disturbances there in Chicago.

Bu: I know. I've been reading. But I feel frankly that we would have had trouble no matter where the convention was held this year. You haven't seen very much written, or there hasn't been very much talk about the problems that were in Miami for the Republican convention. But don't forget that there were, I believe five or six people killed in Miami during their convention from problems somewhat the same as we were having in Chicago. But in Chicago there were no deaths that I know anything about or that I've heard anything about. There were a few hospitalizations, but no more than would have been normal with that many people congregated in any one large city. Some of the things were just dreadful and they were, in my opinion, done almost ninety-nine percent by people outside Chicago and certainly outside Illinois.

Ba: If I've figured it up right, you've presided now at seven Democratic conventions?

Bu: That is correct.

Ba: Has television made much of an impact on the way the convention has conducted itself?

Bu: Television has had a tremendous influence on the American life itself. And it certainly has affected the convention.

Ba: What I meant, do those of you who are running the convention find yourselves sort of tailoring it as a television show--speeding it up, and--?

Bu: Absolutely, and everything is geared to what television wants, when you can get prime time? What's the best time to do everything that needs to be done? Everything needs to be timed as nearly as you can to have it

coincide with exactly what television expects you to do.

Ba: That must fall directly into your job--

Bu: No, it's more or less the manager. Whoever is managing the convention that does that. For instance, John Criswell did it for this last one.

Ba: Do you think this is detrimental or beneficial to the work of the convention, or just another thing you've got to live with?

Bu: Well, it's something we have to live with. There are no two ways about that. It has gotten the average American more interested in what is going on, I believe, in our political world. They follow. It has affected dress, what people wear.

I remember in '48 it was so funny. You know, some of the people who might some day be reading this might be interested to know that I think the main reason we held the convention in Philadelphia in 1948 was because we would have the largest television coverage. In those days, television didn't go beyond the Mississippi River. In the East, and in Philadelphia, we would have the New York audience and the Washington one. It was just a great big exciting sort of a deal. One cosmetic company sent over about two thousand lipsticks for all the ladies, and there was a riot (in an amusing way, not angry) because they were a deep, deep purple. We didn't have color of course--colored television in those days, and lips photographed so poorly that they decided that if they would have these almost black, deep purple lips, that it would show up better. You should have seen the people in person. It was so funny. But nevertheless, that's a part of the growing television world.

Ba: Do you find yourself, as an attractive lady, choosing the clothes you wear to the convention on a basis of how they televise?

Bu: No doubt about it. This year was really sort of funny. I had known, of course, we would have--. The plans had been that we would have four night sessions--Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, you know, each night starting around anywhere from 5:30 to six or seven o'clock in the evening and going on. This way you'd get prime coverage television-wise from East Coast to West Coast. So I said "Well, now," I would wear two more-or-less businesslike dresses, somewhat tailored, for the first two nights. The third and fourth nights, I would go a little bit out and wear somewhat dressier things like the cocktail type outfits because that I thought would be in order and what the average American lady and man would expect me to be wearing. So you can imagine my surprise when the Tuesday night session was brought to a close, and it was announced that we would meet at twelve o'clock tomorrow. I thought, "Oh, mercy, what'll I do now!" Fortunately, I did have another so-called less dressy dress which I did wear and it worked out nicely.

Ba: I suppose that everybody in the world may know this except me, but now-- as of the '68--the conventions are broadcast in color television. Does this make a difference to the color of your clothing and your makeup and things like that?

Bu: Oh, Absolutely. We had a very nice man from Chicago who had a little studio right there in back of the platform that checked out our makeup and the ladies as well as the men underwent that makeup bit. Human beings do photograph better with a little help from some cosmetics. I know the final night I said to the man, "Now, tonight I'm going to be wearing an orange dress."

He said, "Oh, no! Not with that blue!" You know, the podium and

and the whole overall picture was in blue. He said, "Orange will be just dreadful."

I said, "That's what I planned to wear."

He said, "Don't you have anything else you can bring out?"

I said, "Well, yes, I do, and I will." But I did wind up wearing the orange dress which he thought was really quite nice.

Then, because color television is so new to a lot of people, it did not tune in correctly on everybody's sets--for any number of people either called or wrote to me to say how pretty the pink dress was. It wasn't pink at all, it was orange. It was just that their set had not been tuned in directly. But it does make a difference. Also, shiny things like rhinestones or beads that are too showy are not photographed nicely, so you're more-or-less advised, if you are advised, to not wear things that have too much of that sort of stuff.

Ba: Do any of the delegates or other members of the party object about sort of tailoring the whole convention proceedings to television?

BU: I would think that some of them would if you really sat down and talked head and head with all of them. You'd find a lot that wouldn't be happy with anything.

Ba: Anything new, I guess.

Bu: Yes, that is correct. But I think we must go along with it. I don't know how to bring this back up. Some of the problems that we were faced with in Chicago. But you know, we had the telephone strike that created such confusion. Then the fact that the television people couldn't believe that we would not change our plans and hold the convention in Miami, because they already had their studios set up in their convention hall



in Miami. It was going to cost them a great deal of money to dismantle these studios they had built into convention headquarters--whatever they call it.

Ba: Didn't the television networks offer the party a certain amount of money to--?

Bu: I understand that they did. I wasn't in on that so I couldn't take an affidavit to what did transpire or what was offered.

Ba: At the conventions do you, as a party official, ever get with any of the on-the-air television people--the commentators for the networks and so on?

Bu: Oh yes, they ask you to appear.

Ba: I meant in the planning stage.

Bu: Yes. You know, I have from time-to-time served on the Arrangements Committee of the convention, and during those times, sure, I've been in conferences and consultations with some of them.

Ba: Do they just want to know what's going to happen, or do they try to get you to arrange things in a certain way for--

Bu: They try to get you--and usually do--to arrange things to suit them. They just insist on certain space in headquarters and things of that kind so that

(interruption)

Ba: After the '68 convention did you take part in the campaign?

Bu: Oh yes indeed! Well, it seems that I got a lot more coverage from the television people at this last convention than before. As a result I got a lot of requests for appearances as a speaker there in various places.

Ba: In partisan speeches?

Bu: Oh yes.

Ba: Did you concentrate in any one area this time?

Bu: No. I just more-or-less have carried on just as I always have. Just wherever I was requested to come to speak I would go. I was in Ohio a good bit and I was in Tennessee and in Virginia and a few other places.

Ba: Just reading about that campaign--again from an outsider looking in--it looked like it got started slowly and didn't really pick up steam until just right toward the last.

Bu: You mean the campaign?

Ba: Yes.

Bu: Yes, that's true. Of course, there are always so many "ifs". You think, "if this" and "if that" about the whole overall picture. "Did we reach our peak?" You know two or three days before the election, or, "Did it not come?"

Ba: I don't guess you can ever figure out--

Bu: We can go back a little bit beyond that, I think, and see that the time for the convention had been planned prior to President Johnson's decision to not be a candidate. Many people felt that we should have the convention maybe a week or ten days earlier. Yet there's that same question about how long should a campaign go on! And particularly with the television coverage, how much time can you spend! How many times can you say over and over again exactly the same thing! With your magazines and your newspapers, there's just a limit to how much you can--and with the financial end of it, how much it costs. It's just really something.

Ba: I suppose that's another change you've seen in your time--the cost of campaigning has just gotten astronomical in the last ten-twenty years.

Bu: I do not know the answer, but something will have to be worked out. I

am of the opinion that we will have to do something.

Ba: There have been proposals for sort of a public collection by way of income tax forms or some sort of government subsidy for major party candidates.

Bu: I think that both the chairman of the Democratic and the Republican committees must get together and work out something with the Congress to try and do something about it. As to what it will be, I don't know.

Ba: Mr. Johnson--we've almost forgotten in the other things here. I think you may qualify as an expert witness on a phase of Mr. Johnson that I have heard people talk about. They say that Mr. Johnson is awfully good with women--that he is the kind of man who is appealing and attractive to women.

B: He is, indeed. He's very considerate, and he never fails to let you think that you're just about tops in his opinion. You know, he was always so considerate of me, has always been, and would make me feel like he just wouldn't have been where he was today had it not been for something that I did to help get him there.

Ba: How does he do this? Just in speaking to you when he happens to see you?

Bu: The way he can shake your hand and just pat you on the arm and let you know that he not only knows who you are, but appreciates what you have done for him in the past. Not only that, I think he expects you to do it in the future too, or has. I think that's a good point too.

Ba: That might be a part of it. We're nearing the end now, Mrs. Bush. Could you give an evaluation of Mr. Johnson, what the man's strong points and his weaknesses are?

Bu: Actually, Lyndon Johnson has been a great public servant. He will go

down in history as one of the greatest Presidents this country has ever been privileged to have. I feel that he is a devoted husband, a fine father, a great public servant. As to any weaknesses, there may be some, but they are minute, in my thinking, to his greatness in so many ways.

Ba: Thank you very much, Mrs. Bush.

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