

INTERVIEW XII covering 1941

DATE: August 19, 1979

INTERVIEWEE: LADY BIRD JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: LBJ Ranch, Stonewall, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

J: 1941 was a watershed sort of a year for us, just as it was for so many people. But it began in the way all those years after we went to Congress began. I drove the car. Lyndon had gone on ahead in the plane. I left Marshall on a grey, rainy January 1, taking Ray Roberts, who'd been asked to come up and go to work for the Speaker. He was all full of excitement about it, and who wouldn't be? We drove hard. I remember we got as far as Dickson, Tennessee. That was always one of our goals because there was an old country hotel there that had the best family meals along the whole route. You could get all the Tennessee ham and grits and red-eye gravy and hot biscuits and all sorts of good things that you could possibly have, all for the same price. We were furious because we got there too late, after they'd quit serving.

 The next day we met up with Walter Jenkins--the road was full of us in those days going to Washington--and went as far as Roanoke. This again is sort of typical of that time. We spent the night in a tourist home. There were lots of rather nice-looking old homes, usually Victorian with white gingerbread and verandas and a sign out front,

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"Overnight Tourists." We spent the night there and got to Washington the next day around noon, went of course first to the office.

The very first person I ran into after walking into the hall of the House Office Building was Cousin Nat Patton, who said that Lyndon was in the hospital. He had pneumonia and they had taken him to Doctor's Hospital the day before with fever of 104. Of course I went right over there, and Dr. Adams was in charge. He had given him a sulfa drug which had brought the temperature down. He was much, much better, but he was still a very sick man; he'd been out of his head. He'd already fired one nurse.

Lyndon was one of the world's worst patients, I'm sure. Mr. [Charles] Marsh and Alice were the only people who were being admitted. I'm sure the hospital rued that day that they first let them in. They were as hard to live with in the hospital as Lyndon. I should say Mr. Marsh [was], not Alice. The day after I got there, Mr. Marsh was in Lyndon's room when a young intern came in who mistook Mr. Marsh for Dr. Adams. Mr. Marsh caught on immediately, didn't deny it at all, began giving instructions about how Lyndon was to be treated, which the intern was taking right down onto his chart. Oh, later on the hospital was so furious!

Lyndon's hospital room, as soon as he would get over really the serious, frightening part of an illness such as this, his hospital room would become a sort of a revolving door. Everybody would come to see him. All the congressional people would call, and Welly Hopkins and Tex Goldschmidt.

Well, the next day was Sunday, and I felt secure enough about Lyndon to go to Virginia Durr's for lunch, which was always a marvelous treat for me. The intellectual

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fare was rich and made up for whatever might have been lacking in the precision of the way the household was run. One of her houseguests, who actually, really and truly came I think for dinner and wound up staying probably a year, was Decca Romilly [Jessica "Decca" Mitford Romilly Treuhaft]. She was a young British woman, one of the sisters of a famous British family, I think, a minor nobility. [They were] as colorful a family as ever lived, three or four sisters, all very different and all personalities that walked across the stage for several decades. This one, Decca, was very liberal, pro-Communist, very much interested in the civil war in Spain. In fact, her young husband had just left to go and fight in the civil war in Spain. Helen Fuller was there that day and some newspaper people and there was much heated talk of [Ernest] Bevin in England and of the expansion of plants for defense contracts and how democracy was going to be saved. There was always lots of philosophical and political talk around Virginia and Cliff Durr's table.

G: Any insight here on LBJ's thinking? Do you think that he foresaw World War II, and if so, when?

J: Well, he early became a strong defense man. I couldn't cite to you just when, but as I think I've probably mentioned to you, it was Charles Marsh who in a way introduced him to the outside world, and actually to the possibility that [Adolf] Hitler might rule that world. He could talk about it and the hair would rise on the back of your neck. Lyndon was a very absorbing sponge and liked to be around older men, and smarter men and men who were helping run the world. So, yes, although I could not say that I observed that he foresaw the coming of world war, you would have had to been deaf, blind and dumb--we were pretty much lulled to sleep, true, all during 1938, 1939, 1940, with the rising

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tempest in Europe going on, but if you didn't know it was there and if it didn't nibble at you, you would have to be asleep.

After a while, somewhere between lunch and dinner, I went by the hospital. Then, that night, I went to one of the most glittering things, up to that time, that I had experienced in Washington. It was a big dinner given in honor of the Speaker and Miss Lou [Rayburn's sister] at the home of a hostess with a capital H, a Mrs. Denegra [?], who had a house on Massachusetts Avenue, one of those great old homes of stone with ceilings about twenty feet high and a ballroom on the third floor. Something that belonged to another day. The only reason I happened to be invited--sheer chance, with Lyndon sick, but the wife of Congressman Ewing Thomason happened to also be sick, and the Speaker--bless his heart; I'm sure [it was he] who had put both of us on the list--no doubt said it would be nice if the Congressman would bring me. So I got to go and my eyes were really out on stems. Ewing Thomason took me in, and we passed about six livened footmen and butlers before we got to the drawing room where our hostess greeted us. There were flowers and mirrors everywhere and exquisite furniture and about forty guests, including Justice [William O.] Douglas and the Attorney General, Mr. [Robert] Jackson, charming Senator [Alben] Barkley--I sat next to him at dinner--and a governor or two with their wives, and then of course the Speaker and Miss Lou.

Now, the arrival of Miss Lou was always a clarion call to the Texas delegation, to the height of the social season, because the Speaker, for all his folksiness and his simplicity, had a marvelous family feeling, a great love and respect for his sisters and brothers, and especially for Miss Lou, who was sort of the duchess of the clan. She was a

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tall, erect patrician woman. Her hair was rather salt and pepper, as I remembered, and full, and [she had] a very fine profile. You would have known this was an aristocrat wherever you had met her, however simple her manners were. The Speaker always was proud that he took her in on his arm to dinner at the White House and to all these elegant places. It was a sparkling event in her life, of course, coming from the quiet life on the farm at home. But she spent about two or three weeks every January or February with him.

So, the evening stands out in my memory as one of the most brilliant. I remember Alben Barkley sitting next to me. We were talking about a well-known Washington couple and their marriage relation. I said something which was sort of lead up, "Are they getting a divorce?" and he said, "Well, I would say their relation is tenuous." I liked his choices of words.

The next day, Monday, January 6, was the day of the President's State of the Union to Congress. All of those were great days, year after year. Almost always I would occupy my seat and practically lean over the rail and listen to every word. Sometimes if there was a constituent big enough in town that I felt that I should give my seat to, I would, and then at the last minute somebody sweet would always find me another seat, even if it was sitting in the aisle, on the steps, which happened a good many times.

This time the Republicans were silent as stones, because by January of 1940 Roosevelt was talking about--I don't remember exactly, but probably it was lend-lease. At any rate, he was nibbling at the edges of help to Britain. We were not scared as a nation and we were not sold on it. He was trying to take us as far as we would go, I

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believe. But he had to have us behind him; he had to have the Congress and the people behind him. I remember I felt it was rather anticlimactic somehow or another after his Fireside Chat a few nights before.

G: Did you generally listen to the Fireside Chats?

J: Oh, believe me, always.

G: Did the President listen to them?

J: Oh, yes. He usually would have had a lot of talk beforehand with folks like Jim Rowe, who was FDR's secretary.

G: Describe the atmosphere in which you would usually listen to those. Would you do it say in your living room or would you have people over?

J: Yes, I think we would--my recollection is that we would be at our house with close friends or at the house of some close friends, probably along about that time Charles and Alice, we might have been at their house. Welly Hopkins, Tex Goldschmidt, Tommy Corcoran, lots of members of the Texas delegation, a sprinkling of newspaper people would probably be the ones that would be there.

At this time Lyndon was still in the hospital. He didn't get out until two or three days afterwards. He was being deluged with gifts from the Marshes, rather from Charles and Alice. Charles introduced Lyndon to many of the pleasant things of life. I remember he gave him a red velvet smoking jacket during that siege in the hospital, and lots of books--he just fed him books--and magazines. Also he wanted to educate us musically. Not that he was particularly musical, but Alice was, and he admired it.

G: Was this classical music?

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J: Well, likely to be. It was a broad range. German *lieder* was one of his favorites. They used to go every summer to a musicfest in Germany, very well known. Oh, gee, I've been there since myself, not to the fest, but to the lovely, lovely town, in Austria it was. And to the opera. Alice in fact was quite a patron of the arts.

The diet kitchen was just getting absolutely furious with Lyndon, and tray after tray would go back untouched because the Marshes were bringing him in everything he ate. And really, there was some strange business about the hospital trying to arrest Charles Marsh for impersonating Dr. Adams. I don't remember it well enough to tell it, but anyhow I'm sure they came out on the little end of the stick.

Life in our house in those days . . .

(Interruption)

Briefly from time to time, my date book became almost a diary because I would write in shorthand in it. There is a description here of what our life was like so much of the time that I'm just going to simply read the page for Thursday, January 9: "Today has been a mad endurance contest. When I arrived at the hospital, in turn the following came in in such rapid succession: Wright Patman, Roy Miller, Perry Bass, Mr. Shirley, Mr. Marsh and Alice. Then came John [Connally] and the ambulance man and we carried Lyndon home. The nurse failed to come, so we left without her. She called in later in a huff. At home came more visitors: Ray [Roberts], Sam Houston [Johnson], Tex Goldschmidt, Bruce Catton of the NEA [Newspaper Enterprise Association] with John. I served everybody drinks and roasted pecans. Albert Thomas called. It looks like pitched contest."

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That, of course, is the important line of the day because there was beginning one of the big battles of Lyndon's life, which he roundly lost. He wanted very much to be on the Appropriations Committee. So did Albert Thomas of Houston. Albert had about five months more seniority than Lyndon. He had been sworn in in January of 1937. Lyndon had been sworn in, I think, May 10 or something, of 1937. Also, Albert was one of the most able and determined politicians that ever lived. I wouldn't want to pitch a battle with him on anything. But Lyndon did so want to be on the Appropriations Committee. He worked to the last day to make it.

G: Did Mr. Sam help him in that regard?

J: He talked to him; he counseled him. I cannot truly say. I believe he did, and I believe he wanted him to. But you see how hard a thing that would have been when he led not only the whole delegation but the whole House. He needed them all. Albert Thomas, he was a man who might not forget. I think Sam knew that he could always count on Lyndon.

(Interruption)

At home, business picked up as it always did when Lyndon was there. There was a constant stream of people. The work to get on the Appropriations Committee continued with varying actors in the play and everything else was going on at the same time, too, all the threads pulling in together. Jim Rowe, the President's secretary, came by one evening, I remember, with Tex Goldschmidt to put in his observations on Lyndon's going on that committee. Jesse Kellam, always in our life, was there.

As I look back through this diary, I came to one day, Sunday, January 12, that was just so typical. Jesse came to breakfast and then the doctor came by to look over his

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patient. Then Bob and Frances Poage came to lunch with Mary Rather and Ray Roberts and Idanell [Connally]. After that more people [came] than you can count. Our house was just like a Marx Brothers movie in those days, with the doorbell and the telephone and the maid and everybody talking at the same time, guests coming and going, and me trying to cope with getting them something to eat and hanging up their coats and all like that. Lyndon flourished on it; rarely did he get tired. It was amazing.

That's the main thing I remember about those years. In spite of his serious illnesses, he had the great capacity to bounce back, to put in long hours, and so did I. I really didn't know what it was like to be tired, and that was the way with all of us when we were young. I notice in this diary I spoke of Tom Corcoran, who came by during the course of all this. He was a philosophical friend, often put in his bit. I said, "Tom looks like he is made of iron and rubber."

The vote was supposed to be on Monday the 13th. It was put off until Wednesday. Meanwhile there was more maneuvering and telephone calls. I had the feeling that Ewing Thomason, whom we loved dearly, and George Mahon were doubtful. They would probably both go for the seniority. We felt though, that Wright Patman and Bob Poage and [Lindley] Beckworth and Gene Worley were our strongest supporters.

At noon on Wednesday the delegation voted to endorse Albert Thomas for the Appropriations Committee. The vote was ten to eight. Lyndon took it with very good grace and thanked all his lieutenants with a gay little speech in which he said, "There will be other times and other fights."

(Interruption)

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But he was deeply disappointed, to the bottom of his heart, and that wound up a sort of special chapter in his life.

G: He was a good loser, wasn't he?

J: Yes. There were two particular losses that I can remember, sharp and clear. Actually both of them took place in that year, losing this fight to get on the Appropriations, and then of course the big loss, the Senate seat, in August of that year.

So we took a deep breath and went on with the life of 1941 with a mounting sense of urgency in the world and tension and the cloud hanging over Europe and drawing closer to us and the normal day-to-day things at home. There were constituents. They would come to town and I would take them out to dinner, or to the 75th Club, which met once a month, always at some charming spot, some tearoom like the Parrot or the Collingwood out on the way to George Washington's home. Or we would go to the Congressional Club for the afternoon, the Friday teas, where we would have an ambassador or a member of the cabinet talk to us and give us some education. Perhaps old friends from home would come, like Alice and George Brown. That was always a signal to go out and have a good dinner at a hotel.

G: Where would you usually go on a dinner like this?

J: The Mayflower was one of the favorites. A seafood place down somewhere on the waterfront was likely to be another. One that I went to with Lyndon over and over with the Speaker was called Hall's. It no longer exists I'm sure, but it had the best lobster. Oddly enough, I would wind up there as the only woman time and time again. Wright Patman would go without his wife. The Speaker, of course, didn't have one and he didn't

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take dates to those dinners. Lyndon always took me along. I liked it very much. I had little to say but much to listen to.

I went to the National, to the theater, whenever I could. I loved drama. It was early one of my great sources of delight. I could hardly ever lure Lyndon to a movie, but sometimes I would go with women. There was a lot of intellectual fodder for us in those days.

G: You mentioned reading books. Did you read many magazines in this period?

J: There were weekly news magazines and sometimes to put myself to sleep at night, the women's magazines' stories always turned out right, and they weren't very taxing. And of course there were big events, too. We watched the inauguration of FDR in January. I had gotten that movie camera for Christmas.

G: Who gave it to you?

J: Lyndon did. I always hated machinery; I never liked anything [with] more than one button that said off and on, but I was determined to learn how to use that dadgum thing. And I mastered it and took a lot of movies. I was told, however, that I couldn't take my camera to the inauguration. Afterwards it looked like everybody there had theirs and I was so mad.

I remember one of the most thrilling things was the airplanes going over. There was a heightened consciousness that mounted with that year of everything that related to national strength or lack of it.

G: Did you have much contact with the diplomatic corps, with, say, any of the ambassadors from Germany or Japan or any of the Axis countries during then? Did you see them at

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receptions or anything?

J: Very little. Lyndon was a non-party goer. I was an ardent party goer, to the limited places where one could go without one's husband. And as the wife of a congressman of not many years seniority, I didn't get invited to all that many places. But I duly made my calls, which I think I must have explained to you earlier. That did include the diplomatic corps, and [I] soon began to go to all of the national days. Of course, the national day for England was the most outstanding one. It always celebrated the birthday of the queen and always took place in June. I remember how amazed I was when I found out it wasn't really the queen's birthday; it was just because you could always depend on a nice day in June pretty usually. It had to be outside in the lovely grounds of the British Embassy because of the size of the crowd. We always had the most divine, huge strawberries and thick cream flown over. That is until we got into the war. I do not believe that happened as the war years progressed, but of course there was much that was cut out later.

But social life was constituents and 75th Club and the Texas delegation and the Congressional Club. The Texas delegation, women as well as men, was very closely knit and cohesive. We met once a month at luncheon. You could invite a limited number of your constituents and you chose very carefully. You were really conferring a nice opportunity on them. I loved being able to help Lyndon in that way. I really felt like it amounted to something, and the people at home in the Tenth District remembered it, too.

There were also thrilling things, like being invited out to the [Harold] Ickes' for lunch. Lyndon and I had been out there to lunch, always on Sundays, a number of times, and then I was invited out in that month to a luncheon in honor of Mrs. Roosevelt. There

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were cabinet wives there, oh, even including the wife of the Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, and Mrs. [Henry] Morgenthau and Mrs. [Felix] Frankfurter, and an old friend, Helen Gahagan Douglas. I remember as we sat around the lunch table, Mrs. Ickes, who was really a very bright hostess, wanted to liven things up and make it really a more memorable party by going around the table and asking everyone, very briefly in a couple of sentences, to say what her role was, what Washington was to her. She was the wife of a cabinet member and she did so and so, or whatever. I remember how I trembled as it got closer and closer to me. Somehow or another I managed to get through it though, because at any rate, I left in a glow.

G: Anything on Mrs. Roosevelt in that luncheon that you recall?

J: Not in that one. I saw her a number of times, always in large parties, and she was always very purposeful, very serious, very earnest. I suppose the most remarkable thing I remember about her--and this I must have mentioned to you earlier--is about walking through slums of Washington with her. She invited a number of congressional wives to walk with her through what was--I think it must have been southwest Washington, which at that time were really deep slums. Here she just strode forth with long steps and a relatively smallish number of us following her. It was a learning experience, and it was interesting to see that she dared do it, one, because it certainly wasn't a cup of tea and roses-and-lace sort of thing to do. Two, that she cared. And it was a learning experience just to see how dirty and grubby, and, in a way, sort of frightening and foreboding the area was.

There was plenty of intellectual fodder around for Lyndon and me in those days,

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much of it furnished of course by Charles and Alice Marsh in their home--I think by that time they must have had a town house as well as the country place; I know that Charles got one during the war--and a lot with Tom Corcoran, Jim and Libby Rowe, Tex Goldschmidt. It was a lively bunch of friends we had, and a vigorous thinking, philosophic, hard-working [group].

(Interruption)

Another couple with whom we spent many evenings of good talk were Bob and Jean Kintner, who at that time lived close to the Speaker and had small dinners for about eight people, brilliant evenings they were to me. Then Tharon and Milo Perkins. He had been an early member of the Roosevelt New Deal in the Department of Agriculture. With them we always came away having learned about life and government and people.

(Interruption)

Two things happened in my personal life along about this time. I began to go to see a doctor in Baltimore because of the years that we had not had any children and because we both hoped that we would. But that is a long, drawn-out process and we won't go into it much.

The other thing was a quick, sad, but essentially necessary happening. My brother Tony was divorced from his wife of some eighteen years, Elizabeth. Shortly afterward she married an Englishman named Sibley and went to Guatemala to live. Tony would remain in Santa Fe with their two children.

One of the delicious moments of this winter of 1941 was going to lunch at Mrs. [James] Forrestal's. How the wife of a young congressman got invited there to a small

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lunch is still beyond me. Somebody must have dropped out at the last minute. Anyhow, it was a beautiful house. She was a glamorous woman, worldly, quite outside my range of acquaintance. I was fascinated. There were real Marie Laurencin paintings in her bedroom. The whole thing was so far beyond what I had experienced in sophistication and elegance. The talk was of the stage and people like the [Philip] Barrys--he had written *Philadelphia Story*--Dorothy Thompson, Clare Booth, Donald Ogden Stewart. I felt very small but very eager.

One of the good things about this year is the coming of Senator [Alvin] Wirtz and Kittie Mae to Washington to be undersecretary of the interior with Mr. Ickes. He is really a rock in Lyndon's life, a guiding light, a father personality, one of the people we'll always love and need. As the winter wore on, we were more and more often in their home and they in ours.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XII

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This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

- (1) The transcripts shall be available to all researchers.
- (2) The tape recordings shall be available to all researchers.
- (3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcripts and tapes.
- (4) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be provided by the library to researchers upon request.
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Claudia Taylor Johnson 6/20/02
Claudia Taylor Johnson Date

Sharon Everett 5-10-2011
Archivist of the United States Date

Assistant Archivist
For Presidential Libraries

Appendix A

Attached to and forming part of the instrument of gift of oral history interviews, executed by Claudia Taylor Johnson, and accepted by the ~~Archivist of the United States~~ on 5-10-2011.

Mrs. Johnson's Oral History Interviews:

**Assistant Archivist
For Presidential Libraries**

May 26, 1975, with Merle Miller
June 25, 1976, with Merle Miller
June 29, 1976, with Merle Miller
January 30, 1977, with Merle Miller
February 14, 1977, with Merle Miller
August 12, 1977, with Michael Gillette
August 13, 1977, with Michael Gillette
August 14, 1977, with Michael Gillette
February 4, 1978, with Michael Gillette
April 1, 1978, with Michael Gillette
August 6, 1978, with Michael Gillette
October 9, 1978, with Michael Gillette
January 23, 1979, with Michael Gillette
January 24, 1979, with Michael Gillette
January 25-26, 1979, with Michael Gillette
February 27-28, 1979, with Michael Gillette
August 19, 1979, with Michael Gillette
September 2-3, 1979, with Michael Gillette
September 9, 1979, with Michael Gillette
November 13, 1979, with Anthony Champagne
January 4-5, 1980, with Michael Gillette
January 29-30, with Michael Gillette
September 20, 1980, with Michael Gillette
September 26-27, 1980, with Michael Gillette
February 6-7, 1981, with Michael Gillette
February 20-21, 1981, with Michael Gillette
August 10, 1981, with Michael Gillette
August 23, 1981, with Michael Gillette
September 5, 1981, with Michael Gillette
November 15, 1981, with Michael Gillette
January 2-3, 1982, with Michael Gillette
January 10, 1982, with Michael Gillette
January 30, 1982, with Michael Gillette
March 15, 1982, with Michael Gillette
March 19-20, 1982, with Michael Gillette
March 22, 1982, with Michael Gillette

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March 29, 1982, with Michael Gillette
August 3-4, 1982, with Michael Gillette
September 4, 1983, with Michael Gillette
December 30, 1984, video and audio interview with Michael Gillette
January 4, 1985, video and audio interview with Michael Gillette
February 23, 1991, with Michael Gillette
March 4, 1991, with W. C. Trueheart
March 8, 1991, with Michael Gillette
August 1994, with Harry Middleton (six interviews)
November 5, 1994, with Harry Middleton
January 23, 1987, with Nancy Smith
August 18, 1987, with Lou Rudolph, Jim Henderson, and John and Sandy Brice
August 19, 1987, with Lou Rudolph, Jim Henderson, and John and Sandy Brice
August 20, 1987, with Lou Rudolph, and John and Sandy Brice
August 1994, with S. Douglass Cater
March 22, 1985, with Louis S. Gomolak
July 16, 1996, with Jan Jarboe Russell
July 17, 1996, with Jan Jarboe Russell