INTERVIEW XXIV covering 1949

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INTERVIEWEE: LADY BIRD JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL L. GILLETTE

PLACE: LBJ Ranch, Stonewall, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

J: The first of the year, as I have said, was always a series of celebrations of Speaker Sam Rayburn's birthday. Another annual one was the Clark Thompsons' party, which this particular year took place early in February. The Speaker had such a busy time, one had to stand in line to help celebrate his birthday.

Then a custom of those days was stag parties, no longer so much a part of our life, but a lot of serious business and a lot of jocular fun, I gather. I was not there but I'd get reports from Lyndon. But there were always a bunch of things that [were] conducted by men and for men. There was the Radio Correspondents Association [Dinner], followed by the Alfalfa Dinner, I think probably usually in March. Then the Young Democrats--I wonder what they did even about the--there must have been some women members of Congress and Democrats in those days. But a great many things were stag.

This was a year when I had come alive to trying to make our home more attractive. I was busy. Hardly a week passed without conference with Miss Genevieve Hendricks, a wonderful decorator who became quite a friend of mine. It was a milestone

in my house and in my life when I finally began to acquire some handsome things, like the chandelier above the dining room table, and the red satin drapes in the dining room, and the French wallpaper showing the revolutionary time in our country's history. Bit by bit, with money from Alabama, I would buy a piece, and I think it was very much in line with our way of life that the first thing I bought was a dining room table, and the next thing--and it took us practically a year to acquire these--were eight handsome Chippendale chairs with leather seats, at which first and last I expect a quorum of the Senate sat, and [there was] an awful lot of good talk around it.

Lyndon, of course, was just settling in to this huge new job. He would get an enormous amount of mail, over two thousand letters in a week. He had a big office. I've heard that it was just about the biggest of any senator; I don't think that could have been the case. But he had three rooms; one of them was his, and then two other rooms. A lot of the old- timers that were with us for many years [were on the staff], like John Connally was his top man. John just came with the promise to stay one year only and get him started off. Walter Jenkins and Mary Rather and Dorothy Nichols. We got Glynn Stegall over from where he had been in--I don't know whether this was when he first came back to us, but anyhow. And Christine Moore [Stugard], and then two who had not been with us so long, but became very close to us for years, Horace Busby and Warren Woodward.

Lyndon had learned a lot from the old-timers, particularly Mrs. Kate George, who always was with the congressman who represented that far West Texas congressional district, as big as any European duchy. The next congressman, whoever he was, would

always just welcome her as they were succeeded. And Miss Alla Clary of course had been with the Speaker since time began. Lyndon was a favorite of theirs, and they taught him much and he was a ready learner.

G: I understand that by comparison he did have a very large Senate staff, by comparison with other senators.

J: Yes, that's what they said, and also everybody just says that they worked terribly hard. I know they worked terribly late, because of the hours that Lyndon kept.

One of the things about that office that I remember with affection was that he had pictures on one wall of all the boys that were named after him, that he could get in touch with and get pictures of. I remember at one point he wrote his mother and said, "Do you know of any others?" Of course, later on there was a time when a Chinese family named two children [after him]. There was a Lyndon in that family and a Lynd*a*.

Texas visitors continued to pour in, and that was one of the things I could do and loved doing, and that was to entertain the wives of all the visitors and sometimes the men themselves. Folks from the REA [Rural Electrification Administration] were frequent visitors, like the Martin Hyltins and the Babe Smiths. There were a whole series of things, which I'm sure I have talked about before, that went on and on, like the Texas Ladies delegation every month and the 75th Club, and the Congressional Club. To this there was added for me something that was a joy for twelve years, and that was participation in the Senate Ladies Red Cross, which met every Tuesday. The presiding officer was the wife of the vice president. A whole lot of us met--and a very diverse group we were--and made bandages, or if we knew how to sew, we could do layettes for

the infants of servicemen who were in need. If we knew how to crochet, we could crochet afghans, shawls. If we knitted, we could make socks for veterans, particularly in hospitals.

G: What did you do especially on this? Did you have one--

J: I am an ignoramus in most of those fields, so I just made the bandages and listened, listened, listened because it was a great way to learn about the wives of your husband's colleagues, and, therefore, about the states they represented, and the men themselves. Politics stopped at the door. You'd be sitting by somebody whose husband you knew was pretty much of a mortal enemy of your husband, but we never let it bother us. I've heard some marvelous tales, particularly from the old-timers, from women whose husbands had been in the Senate years before, and who, when their husbands died or retired, were likely to continue on in Washington, and, "Once a Senate wife, always a Senate wife" was our motto. Later on it became a little strained in several ways when there were some divorces. In those days I don't remember any divorces.

I remember one of the wonderful tales was from a Senate wife from one of the Dakotas who talked about living in a sod house. I think it was her father and mother who lived in this sod house, and she herself as a small child. You know, the advancing pioneers crossing the land westward just had all sorts of hardships. It was really a testimony to the youth of our country just to sit and listen to somebody that had personally participated in that.

G: Did you have any particular favorites among the Senate wives?

J: Oh, indeed! Mrs. Lister Hill was one that I was always fond of. I don't remember

exactly when she got there, but Mary Ellen Monroney was, and still is, someone I was always fond of and Ivo Sparkman. All the southerners. I must say I gravitated toward the southerners, but I did get exposed to, learned and liked, a lot of those from all over the United States. For instance, Mrs. Prescott Bush, from Connecticut, and Mrs. [Leverett] Saltonstall, who must have been from Massachusetts. I get a little mixed up with those. I think of them all as New England.

G: They do, too, by the way.

You mentioned that politics stopped at the door, but did it ever reverse itself? Did the Senate wives ever use their friendship to cement feuds or create new avenues of communication among senators who were otherwise, say, not inclined to work together?

J: I can't think of a specific instance. At any rate, if they did, it was in a very subtle, feminine way because it was mostly a man's world in those days.

G: Did you regard the Senate as much more of a club-type environment than the House?

J: At once and indeed I did, although it was a sort of an affectionate long-term argument between Lyndon and the Speaker. The Speaker thought there was nothing under God's heaven like the House of Representatives, and he used to sort of speak slightingly of the Senate to Lyndon, but always it was in a joking way.

Marvelous stories were told there. Mrs. Lucy George, of Georgia, was one of the best storytellers and frequently had a racy edge to them. When they would talk--we all brought our lunch in brown bags or else we sent in our order and got something simple like a hamburger or a sandwich. We made our own coffee, or rather we had a tiny little alcove in which one of the porters--I think we paid him, [he] worked for the government,

but I think we paid him a little extra for moonlighting for us. During the course of that time, we all acquired mugs with our names on them and I wonder where my mug is today. I don't know. Maybe you all have it in the Library. As people began to travel more, by 1949--well, I know it was 1956 before we took our trip, but everybody had been going to NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] for ages before we went. Each wife returning from an interesting trip was likely to tell about her experiences. That was sort of our little program. I heard some wonderful stories that way.

G: Did all the Senate wives participate?

J: Not by a long shot. There were some, the steady and the faithful, and then there were the--the young and giddy were not much interested because you could very well laugh at this, you know, and think it dull. It was far from dull to me. Or not stylish, you might think it not stylish. We always had a good crowd. I must say, it had some relation to the wife of the vice president, the leader, you know, whether she took the job seriously, showed up every Tuesday, kept on urging us on, reminding us of the special dates and how much we accomplished this year as in comparison to last year. I must say that one of the most faithful, and one of the nicest, ones we ever had was Pat Nixon. I don't think she missed a Tuesday unless she was out of the country with her husband. We took it rather seriously. I, too, later on acquired that job.

We had a high point a year. There were certain things that marked the calendar, year in, year out, and in the Senate for us it was the time when we had the party honoring the first lady, whoever she was, and to it, all former first ladies were invited and all the cabinet members' [wives]. It was a very gala occasion. The Senate wives who had

charge of putting on the luncheon outdid themselves year after year in the color of the tablecloths and the displays of flowers and the food that they would get brought up from their [native states]. For instance, Maryland was always likely to give some wonderful crabs or shrimps or something like [that]. Maybe it was Louisiana who would be sending the shrimp. Texas, alas, I don't know; chili was not very likely to be on those menus. I think maybe I brought up some pralines to take home.

G: Do you recall any of the former first ladies that came to those?

J: I certainly recall one of the former vice presidents' wives and that was Mrs. [Henry] Wallace, lovely woman, who never missed a one until she became too old and feeble. Everybody was so happy to welcome her. No, I actually can't because you know it just wasn't Mrs. Roosevelt's cup of tea really, and in those days, in 1949, who would have preceeded us in the presidency? Well, there were twelve years in the Senate for me.

G: You've talked some about the Senate wives. I wanted you to look at this list of senators in 1949 and just go down the list as people come to mind, and, if you would, summarize any unique relationships that these men had with Lyndon Johnson, or what springs to mind as you think of these particular senators and how he interacted with them or what they were like.

J: All right. First on the list is George Aiken of Vermont, always enormous respect on Lyndon's part, partly for his character and ability, partly for his age. They were worlds apart geographically, but very--at least on Lyndon's part--deferential.

Clinton Anderson, just a good friend, knew him well, liked him, worked with him, used to go on the *Sequoia* with him. He was one of those--President Truman would have

a group of men accompany him for dinner, talk and maybe some poker. Clinton Anderson would be one of those, and Lyndon had the fun of going some.

Styles Bridges was a Republican that was a good friend of ours, *very* conservative and had a handsome blonde wife.

Harry Byrd of Virginia is one. He was an archetype to me. Lyndon had, and I had, enormous respect and affection for him, and his Sunday lunches down at Rosemont were an annual thing that I'd just get mad as hops if I didn't get to go to.

Now Virgil Chapman of Kentucky, wonderful storyteller, was not there very long, but he had that sort of closeness with Lyndon that southerners--as a Kentuckian he was [from a] borderline state, but we thought of them as southerners, had a special camaraderie.

Tom Connally, had to admire him, but he could really cut anybody up. Tall, handsome, quick on his feet and with his tongue. He was a masterful man. Not warm. I suppose a lot of people were a little scared of him. I know we were certainly--

G: He was really getting old by this time, wasn't he?

J: Well, not to my thinking then, but the years pretty soon were getting to him.

Now Paul Douglas was somebody who was very different from Lyndon. Their lives were a world apart. He was much more [of an] academician, sort of a teacher and thinker, but they recognized each other's good qualities and some of my favorite introductions of Lyndon were by Paul Douglas.

James Eastland. Now he was--as you know, the Deep South doesn't get any deeper than Mississippi. Lyndon always just liked him fine, although--well, I know that

Eastland just couldn't stand some of Lyndon's views on civil rights and so forth, but nevertheless, personally, he and his wife I liked real well.

Allen Ellender had a lovely wife who died early in our acquaintance in the Senate. I remember him, chiefly, as having an annual luncheon of seafood that he himself cooked. He would tell you how he--he cooked a whole lot of it in his apartment I think, and then he would bring it down to his office and finish cooking it, and then he'd serve it there in his office, with help from the Senate Dining Room, and invite nothing but women. This was kind of a reversal of the usual trend of the day. He invited me as a Senate wife, and later on I went as a vice president's wife and as a first lady. Very nice man, and sort of made a thing of being interested in the ladies, which I don't think he was all that much.

G: He liked to travel quite a bit, didn't he? Didn't he have a reputation for [traveling]?

J: Yes, I think he did. I think he was one of the outstanding travelers. And then Allen Frear, small in stature but loud in voice, a very faithful friend. If he was with you, he was always with you. One of the funny things, whenever they called the roll, here this slight man would stand up and just holler, "Present" or, "Aye" or whatever the response was.

Bill Fulbright, our friend for many years and our opponent for later years, interesting, handsome, but very often winding up in opposition to and with just an edge of bitterness toward a lot of people. Had one of the nicest wives in the whole Senate, Betty Fulbright.

Walter George was one of the giants. Lyndon always sat at his feet, in a figure of speech. He just thought for judgment, for justice, for knowledge, you just couldn't beat

Walter George.

G: Was George also a great orator?

J: Yes, he was.

One of my favorites was Theodore Francis Green, who was already older than time, and who stayed quite a long time. He, too, was kind of an archetype New Englander. Lots of stories about how close he was with his money. Now he's another one who recognized Lyndon from afar as a leader, I mean early he began to like him and they began to talk and listen to each other. I think he probably nominated Lyndon or seconded it, somewhere in the course of Lyndon's becoming leader. He had a wonderful and diverse group of people espousing him, from Dick Russell to Theodore Francis Green. One of the great adventures of my life was going through Senator Green's home, where his ancestors had gone to China in the early clipper ships and brought home Chinese export of lovely dishes of all sort and furniture and art objects. He had portraits on the wall of Greens from generation to generation to generation who had had important posts.

(Interruption)

Then there was Carl Hayden of Arizona, who was a landmark in the Senate, already at that time quite elderly, but still with years ahead of him. He had been representing the state of Arizona since it entered the Union, which was about 1912. He was enormously respected, and Lyndon had a lot of deference for older people.

Lister Hill of Alabama, a courtly gentleman. Both he and his wife were my dear favorites, did so much for health, for medicine, had that background in his family. The

Lister, his first name, is after a man who invented antiseptics, I think.

Then Clyde Hoey of North Carolina, who used to wear what Speaker Rayburn called a clawhammer coat and always a flower in his lapel, and was a born raconteur, could tell the most marvelous stories. He was just straight out of central casting for a southern senator. Smart. Maybe central casting wouldn't send you one like that, but I mean in appearance.

And of course Hubert Humphrey, early, we became friends early. He had the most loving and outgoing nature. Now, it was hard in 1948, his role in the convention and his general philosophy would have made him not a favorite of Texans, to put it mildly, and of Lyndon's constituency. But a dear man. He and Muriel, they were young, they are more or less our age, and we early developed an affection.

G: Do you know how those two first got acquainted? Was it at the conventions, do you think?

J: I don't know, and I would very much doubt that.

G: But he had been mayor of Minneapolis, I think.

J: Yes, and it could have been at that time.

Nearly every one of these people I remember, and it would be tiresome to you and uninteresting to readers of the future, if there are any, if I would recite them all, but big Ed Johnson from Colorado, he was one of the stalwarts.

I have a memory of [William] Jenner as having been an isolationist or somebody that we were never close to.

Olin Johnston, of South Carolina, Lyndon admired very much. He was a man of

great integrity and loyalty, and he had pulled himself up by his bootstraps from tenant farmer to governor to Senate. Interestingly enough, his daughter I think is now somewhere in state government, and his wife was a good friend of mine.

Estes Kefauver, of course, he practically belonged on the stage. Very sort of Lincolnesque in appearance. Everybody will always remember that coon-skinned cap and his battles with the Crump machine. A good human being.

G: They were never close though, were they?

J: No, they were not close.

G: Why was that?

J: I don't know that they were not close. They were very different. I guess Lyndon was more a team player, and Estes was not.

And Bob Kerr. It was a marvelous class of senators, a marvelous group that entered it at that time, and Bob Kerr soon became one of our great favorites. Big, tough. There were some things about him that were rather like a Baptist preacher. Also he was a consummate and successful businessman. But I think he was really beautifully at home in the Senate. Lyndon often used to say, when he was in the presidency, if somebody would say, "If you had your wish, what would you ask for?" and he'd say, "I'd ask for Sam Rayburn back as speaker and Bob Kerr in the Senate," when he needed to get something done. Bob Kerr was very much against drinking, anything, anytime. He didn't like Lyndon to have a drink. I can't say that he made a sale on that one though.

And Bill Knowland of California, who became--let's see, he was minority leader. I forget, I guess it was only [Robert] Taft--was Taft the only majority leader during that

brief period of time?

G: No, I think that Knowland continued. Let's see, Knowland really took over from Taft in 1953 and continued until 1955, so he would have been there for two years after Taft.

J: Very nice man, but I had the feeling Lyndon could outrun him on either side. But they got along fine.

Henry Cabot Lodge, quite patrician. We didn't know him very well, but from our distant vantage points we looked up to him.

Russell Long, well Lyndon was enormously interested in, because he used to have a standing request when he was a young secretary to a congressman that whenever Senator [Huey P.] Long took the floor that one of the elevator boys or somebody get on the phone and tell him and he would go at a run from his office over to hear Senator Long. So we early met, knew and liked Russell and his wife, Katherine. She just didn't stay in Washington very much of the time though.

Pat McCarran always had the same table in the Senate Dining Room, quite different philosophically, but a very interesting character.

Then someone who dominated a certain part of the fifties, and in a fearsome fashion, was Joe McCarthy. That was a tragic story for him and for everybody. He was Irish, likeable, tough, but he had sort of a dark and brooding look. There were a lot of folks that were scared of him, and later on there was time to be scared of him. I think one of the most skillful and painful things [Lyndon did]--and it was painful to Lyndon, nevertheless he thought it had to be done--and that was to bring him down from the position where he could hurt the lives of a lot of people who didn't deserve to be hurt.

Then next comes Senator [John] McClellan, of Arkansas, whose wife was one of those exquisite china--beautiful women, still was the last time I saw her in very advanced years, Norma. Senator McClellan was sort of--he and Lyndon were never close. Lyndon recognized his skills and abilities, but there was never the sort of relationship that he had with Dick Russell or many of the southerners, Walter George, either of the Alabama senators. It was through him that we first heard--I'll continue this when I get back--(Interruption)

An interesting little sidelight is that it was through Senator John McClellan that somewhat later on, and I don't remember what year, we first heard of Robert Kennedy. Senator McClellan said, "I have a young man on my staff"--that was some committee--"that is very bright that you ought to meet." I don't know that we did, but he just told us about him and later on I recalled it.

Ernest McFarland of Arizona became a staunch friend, a big, earnest--no play on names--really a very earnest, and good, and faithful friend. Lyndon became minority leader [majority whip] when he was majority leader.

Brien McMahon was a very handsome young senator from Connecticut, struck down by cancer at an early age, but quite a comer in those days, with a lovely wife, who later on married a Belgium diplomat, ambassador.

Warren Magnuson, who was in the Senate until just this January of 1981, one of Lyndon's early friends in the House of Representatives in the war years, and just the bachelor who couldn't be corraled into marriage until finally, I think, it was probably in our years in the White House when he finally did. We used to have a few vacation

weekends with him and his lady love of the current time.

Then there was a very conservative Republican named George Malone. We had a good relation, just a sort of a bantering friendship and lots of--

G: He was able to secure Malone's support, I understand, on a lot of votes where Malone really had been unlikely to do so.

J: Yes, sort of strange. Lyndon was far, far apart from a lot of people, but somehow the business of the Senate transcended that on a number of occasions.

Burnet Maybank, Lyndon could never understand a word he said. He was from Charleston, South Carolina, with the deepest accent I have ever heard, and South Carolina does have a unique one, for me, a real southerner. Liked him, everybody liked him, but we hardly ever really knew what he was talking about.

Wayne Morse, I remember--oh, they crossed swords so many times, such enemies they were in many ways, and yet, I heard Lyndon make the remark that every Senate ought to have a Wayne Morse. I was kind of bowled over because at that time he was really fighting Lyndon on something, and I said, "Why?" He said, "Because he believes with such zeal in what he does believe in, and he gigs a lot of us and reminds us of the other side." Well, in any case, he was a staunch friend in some things, I think it was--was it in the educational matters, or labor, one of the other. But he was pretty irascible and in a way liked to fight for fighting's sake. But Lyndon had a lot of respect for people who were seldom on his side.

G: What about Eugene Millikin from Colorado?

J: I don't have any memories of him, and I'm sure I should. Nor many of Karl Mundt or Jim

Murray, except that I know that Jim Murray was one of the old-time men of stature. Francis Myers I only remember in relation to that first terribly important episode in our lives, but it was surpassed easily, when there were still some bitter voices from Texas that wanted to contest Lyndon's seat, but the Senate itself had to make the decision and Senator Myers was, I think, chairman of that committee.

Joseph O'Mahoney I just remember as being a picturesque part of the old-time establishment. Claude Pepper, at that time though, was young and gingery. As I look at this list he is one of the very few, he and Russell Long, perhaps the only two that I can see that are still around, though he of course is in the House now.

Willis Robertson as courtly as could be, and the essence of Virginia gentleman.

Then without a doubt the one single man that Lyndon looked up to the most was Dick Russell of Georgia, for his brain, his ability, and they were staunch friends. Now in the later days a cloud fell across their paths, and I don't really know quite what the makings of it were. But at any rate, it was very painful to Lyndon, particularly that Senator Russell should believe that Lyndon as president wouldn't do something that he, Dick Russell, thought was right and that he ought to do. It was about appointing somebody.

G: The Alex Lawrence judgeship.

J: I think it was one of those cases of bad communications and in some way, our attorney general figured in it a very negative fashion.

G: Ramsey Clark.

J: Ramsey Clark.

G: Did he immediately seek out Russell's advice? Did he sort of go--

J: Gravitate toward him?

G: Yes.

J: I'm sure he would have, because I expect, from his position in the House, he had at least been observing the leaders of the Senate. I don't remember him saying to me anything about, "Dick Russell is the man I want to follow, and I'm going to get to know him better." You could only know Dick Russell if he chose to know you anyhow. He didn't go places socially much.

G: Did he know Russell very well when he had been in the House or was this a friendship that only developed--

J: I think it only began in the Senate. I do not remember its being a part of our House years.

G: If you had to describe how that friendship was born, what incidents would you recall? Can you recall any, say, dinner parties or getting together or trips, things like that that might have provided the cement for the friendship? When they first started getting together?

J: I can't remember when they first started to get together. I know the circumstances under which they would. It would be when it was a small, familiar group. He was just not a man for [socializing], one reason is, not having a wife who would make him, he didn't have to go to these big cocktail parties or receptions or things. He would choose only a small group, preferably people that he worked with, and usually a sprinkling of southerners. [He] could be the most wonderful storyteller when he chose to. There was something, and I don't know--not becoming president, not getting his party's nomination

for the presidency, at some point had an effect on him. I just cannot overstate Lyndon's admiration for him and his desire to listen to him and learn from him. It's a painful story to think that he developed this lung trouble and lived with it for so long. I'm glad I knew him, and I'm glad I knew him all the years I did, but I saw him going downhill, and in good times and in bad. His character would keep him working when he ought to have been home or in the hospital, probably.

I think I've already mentioned Leverett Saltonstall.

Now Margaret Chase Smith, Lyndon always admired her. He was a little scared of her. You couldn't make her do anything. You might be able to persuade her. She was quite arm's distance, but I would class her as a friend most of the time. And John Sparkman was a friend practically all the time, and the same for John Stennis.

Bob Taft, Lyndon had a lot of awe for him. We were far from intimate, ever, because he was a colossus, and we were young and just beginning. He handed Lyndon a very early defeat; I forget the circumstances, although it may have been his--it was certainly early that spring and it was something on how to handle--I mean it was early when Lyndon became, I guess, minority leader.

G: 1953.

J: Yes. We looked at him from a distance, but we knew we were looking at somebody great.

Millard Tydings was chairman of Lyndon's Armed Services Committee, and a very courtly gentleman who lived in an absolutely glamorous house that was his wife's father's house, I think, the Joseph Davies' house. Was he--

G: Ambassador to Russia, I believe?

J: Yes. I remember riding up to that front door to pay a call on her and how my eyes were just sticking out on stems as I approached that house.

Arthur Vandenberg was more of a legend than a figure we really knew. Bob Wagner of New York, we came to know his son much better in later days. He, too, was just somebody that we knew through legend. So I think that about covers my memories of the chief ones.

A dinner party at our house in those days was likely to have a mixture of, oh, say Stu Symington and Abe Fortas and Don Cook and Senator [Alvin] Wirtz from Texas when he was up, Bill Douglas, the Tom Clarks, the Speaker any time we could get him, Fred Vinson, who was, sometime during and I forget just when, to become the chief justice. And Bob Kerr and George McGhee. They were always interesting, and just practically everybody that we knew went on to have a sizeable job in one way or another. Lyndon early became--and I don't remember when--a friend of Phil Graham's of the *Washington Post*.

Ladies' luncheons continued to be a part of my daily fare. So many social things have changed. We hardly ever have ladies' luncheons anymore. Hats, hats, hats. Gloves. One thought a lot about clothes in those days. Maybe we still do, but we allow ourselves a good deal more diversity now. We were pretty much all--there was quite a lot of sameness in those days, and your spring hat was almost sure to have flowers. Dresses were at a very unattractive length, sort of mid-calf, and we all looked matronly and older.

Early, there was a sort of a civil war began to boil up in Texas politics over who

was going to be national committeeman. [Wright] Morrow had been national committeeman, but at first he refused to go along with Truman. Later on I think he did raise money for the national ticket. So the Democrats had appointed [Byron] Skelton, but they couldn't get him in somehow; I don't remember the details of the fight.

(Interruption)

So as we were getting settled into the Senate, there were big things happening on the scene. It's hard from one's vantage point right in the middle of things to tell what's big and what isn't big. Thinking back over it, the tidelands controversy was certainly one of the most time-consuming and heatedly argued things of several years, but you well remember all about it. But it filled the newspapers and it filled the Texans' conversation. I remember going down to the Supreme Court one day and sitting and listening. Mr. Justice Hugo Black was interrogating a witness, and he finally just asked him, "Well, do you mean you think it ought to belong to the United States just because it is the United States?" That is what of course Hugo Black himself believed, I think, and I think finally acted--at any rate, it eventually reached a compromise sometime that year, I think.

Another thing very important in our first few months was the death of--or rather the burial, because he had been killed in combat several years before--of a Mexican-American named Felix Longoria who was denied burial in his home area I think, of Three Rivers, Texas. But I believe I've gone into all of that.

G: You did attend the funeral, is that correct?

J: Oh, you bet Lyndon did, and I usually went most places he did, and I was there. It was a gray, cold, drizzly day in that always impressive cemetery. But I think we've discussed

all that before.

One way that you reached your constituents in those days was on the Texas State Forum of the Air, and Lyndon and Wright Patman and the Speaker spoke on that at least once that spring.. In fact, they were kind of a triumvirate in the Texas delegation, and a very close-knit organization it was in those days.

President Hoover's commission on government and reform, the results of that came up to us then, to discussion, up to the Senate. The threads of life go in and out of the tapestry. I came across that a good many years later on in a letter that Hoover had written to President Truman. This letter was lying on President Truman's desk out at the [Truman] Library in Independence, Missouri, and President Truman was giving me what he called the five-dollar tour. He saw my eyes just dropping to that letter open on his desk and he said, "Pick it up and read it if you want to." Really, it was the most touching thing, because Hoover was saying--it was obvious that he had been out of things, and then he said, "And you have called me to do a job in the only field for which I am equipped, public service." I think it was very good of President Truman to have done it, and very good of him to have said yes.

About that time, President Truman discovered that the White House was in such a sad state of repair that he had to move out of it, it had to be done over, gutted and just built from the inside out with steel supports. So he asked for and got a sizeable amount of money from the Congress. I saw a little piece in the paper about how if you sent in three dollars or something, I forget what, you would get a brick and a small piece of pine, or a piece of marble or some nails, anyhow, a little sack of materials out of the White

House. Anyone could do it, but you couldn't get but one. So I went around and got everybody in the office, gave them all the five dollars or the whatever it was and said, "Y'all send in and say you want it." So I got myself quite a few pieces, and there is today a brick in the front of this house with a tiny little plaque on it that says it came from the White House.

Senator Wirtz coming to Washington was always a lively spot in our lives, a warm good spot.

G: Did he usually stay with you all or would he stay in a hotel?

J: He stayed, by his own preference, in a hotel, and he would take us out for a good dinner if we'd let him, which we often did. But he always came to our house also.

G: Where did he usually stay, do you recall?

J: Everybody, it seemed to me in those days, stayed at the Mayflower, at least most Texans did. It was just their habitat. The Dale Millers had, for an untold number of years, an apartment there to which they had lots of fun parties, heavily sprinkled with Texans.

Back home there was a hot race for the city council going on in which many of our old friends participated. Mayor [Tom] Miller got in, and then as I recall, got out, and I believe that was the time that Taylor Glass went in. Emma Long was very much a part of it.

Jefferson-Jackson Day dinners were a big thing, during a whole decade or so they seemed to--that was one of the days of the year when you had to be there.

Something that affected our personal lives--Paul Bolton was a very close friend of ours, a newspaperman that had been on Lyndon's staff and then had gone with us very

early, I don't remember exactly when, but after we got KTBC in 1943 he may have gone with us practically immediately. But his daughter developed cancer of the thyroid, which was absolutely frightening. And there was an exchange of letters between him and Lyndon. Lyndon, as always, appealed to Jim Cain and got her up there [to the Mayo Clinic], and quickly, and they performed an operation that was--I think it turned out to have actual considerable medical significance because the treatments they used are supposed to--I wonder if I'm telling the truth, but I remember clearly there was talk about whether she would ever be able to have children, and she was a newly married young woman, I think, and maybe she had one child then. I know though that she did have children later, and it was a cause for cheering, and it was indeed very much a cause for cheering that she lived, because she was in a very perilous situation, and there was a lot of writing . . .

G: I think she had some sort of iodine treatment, didn't she?

J: Yes, that's what it was, and iodine is supposed to be absorbed very quickly by cancer of that type and helps kill it off.

My children as usual had a good deal--they always seemed to be subject in those years and at that time they were just--Luci was just getting on towards two and Lynda Bird was five, and they always had colds, and tonsils, and fever. The wintertime was long, and getting on and off those snowsuits was a labor. But Lyndon himself--the plague of his life, those kidney stones, began to give him trouble and he had a lot of pain, but he couldn't go to Mayo's because Dr. [Gerst] Thompson, this miracle worker, was out of the country for a while and wasn't coming back. So he just had to wait for that.

Civil rights legislation reared its head. It's amazing when you look back and see all the things that President Truman started, pushed, and kind of like Moses, couldn't get us through to the promised land, but did his best, and that later on did get passed, like Medicare and civil rights. Of course, he took his share of hard knocks on both of those. It's very interesting to read, in retrospect, letters that we received at that time from constituents back home. Like Lyndon was going to be having a big rally, and one of his supporters wrote him and said, "We may have some trouble with Negroes buying tickets and coming. But we think it will be all right, and we'll make sure that their tables are separated a little bit." So we've come a long way, all of us.

G: Let's talk about the civil rights issue here. It was, of course, a dual question, the procedural matter of cloture and unlimited debate, and then the substantive issue of federal anti-lynching legislation. From reading over the correspondence it's clear that LBJ was, on the one hand, disappointed that a number of black leaders reacted as they did to his speech and his vote on the question. It might be a good idea to get you to recall what you remember about his speech first, and his stance on the question of federal anti-lynching legislation, and also how he reacted to the blacks' reaction here. Do you remember that?

J: That is one of those things of great significance that you don't realize at the time how big it looms. I can remember far more trivial things, and I cannot remember anything really substantive about it.

G: The speech itself I guess was his maiden speech in the Senate, and I understand you were in the gallery.

J: I'm sure I was, and it was on--wasn't it on unlimited debate?

G: Yes, and I think it dealt also with the constitutional issues. It was, of course, not a race-baiting speech at all; it talked to the legalities and the substance of the matter. But do you recall--

J: Sitting in the gallery and watching him?

G: Yes.

J: No, I don't. I missed a lot of opportunities, I'm sorry to say. I don't know that I ever saw [Winston] Churchill. I can remember very well indeed that I did see MacArthur, General [Douglas] MacArthur. It was always my habit to give my tickets in the gallery--if I possibly could bring myself to do it--to some constituent, but I cannot think that I had an opportunity to listen to Churchill and failed to do it.

G: Anything else on the civil rights issue that spring?

J: I wish I could think of something that triggered my memory of it. I'll tell you one thing that stands out in my memory is that Virginia Durr, from my earliest recollection, would beard Lyndon the minute he came in the room on the question of poll tax legislation, which she was dedicated to putting an end to, and I think there were still eight states remaining. According to Virginia, he'd always tell her, "Now, Virginia, you know I'll be for it and I'll do it anytime we've got the votes. Sometime we will. But you can't do it now."

Another much less important thing, but a part of my life in those days, was the 81st Club. Besides getting acquainted with the Senate ladies, there was another social activity. All the members who came in the 81st Congress, their wives got together in

what was called the 81st Club. There was a big crop of us that year, and a good crop of new Senate and House members. The Gerald Fords were members from the House, and of course the Homer Thornberrys, and a lot of people who remained in our lives. So that met once a month and that was a lot of fun. We always went to luncheon at some attractive place. The town was full of what were likely to be called tea houses in those days, had no relation to afternoon tea, just lunch and dinner, with accent on being quaint. Mrs. K's Toll House Tavern was a favorite.

Women's teas, as well as women's luncheons, were part of the pattern of life. Mary Ellen Monroney had a tea for everybody to come meet Mrs. Kerr, whose husband was new to the Senate from her state. Saw all sorts of newspaperwomen like Doris Fleeson and Esther Van Wagoner Tufty, and Madame [Hellé] Bonnet, the wife of the French ambassador; they were a couple that stayed there forever and went everywhere. And Carolyn Hagner Shaw of the *Green Book*.

We began to branch out a little bit. I began to be able to get Lyndon to take us occasionally to an embassy, the Mexican Embassy for instance. That he somehow seemed to think much more important than just about any other embassy.

And always a part of the early part of the year were the visits of the Speaker's sisters, but I think I've talked about that earlier, have I not? When Miss Lou would come and any of the other sisters, that was the time to start quite a social season.

The Texas State Society remained a part of our lives. We were very faithful to them and they to us all during those years, and they had a party in honor of the new senator.

Things were going pretty well with Lyndon's family. Sam Houston came to see us, and he seemed to be in good physical and psychological shape.

G: He was in Dallas during part of this period?

J: Yes.

G: What was he doing there, do you know?

J: I don't know. That was a new job; I don't know what it was. He was a good hand with the children, always enjoyed Lynda especially.

It was about that time, early in March I guess, that Jim Forrestal resigned as secretary of defense, and Truman appointed Louis Johnson. It was not very long afterward that Forrestal, from his room in the hospital, committed suicide, by jumping out of the window. You thought then about how racked he had been with problems and tensions.

Meanwhile, Lyndon at one point went to Bethesda [Naval Hospital], had a whole lot of tests. They couldn't figure out--they knew he had an infection because he had a very high blood count, and they knew he had kidney stones, but they didn't know what the infection sprang from. Actually, the tests really proved nothing except that he had an infection. Anyhow, he felt pretty miserable and worked very hard--twelve hours a day, six days a week would about get it.

Finally, finally the last chapter was written in our Senate race of 1948 when Charles Francis sent up, presented a report to the Senate subcommittee investigating the senatorial election. I don't know quite what the words are, but they said this is ended, finished, Senator Johnson is here.

Another important thing, looking at it in retrospect, that Lyndon realized was important that I didn't understand at the time, and still of course don't expect that its importance is clear to all, now its solution is not clear, and that is water. Because even in those early days the waters of a river being drained off in a state above you could become a mighty hot issue. The Pecos River flowing through New Mexico and into Texas was the subject of a lot of argument. It finally reached some kind of a compact on who gets how much.

G: Do you recall who he worked with principally on that?

J: Clinton Anderson, with whom he worked well and easily, and Senator [Dennis] Chavez.

Do you have anything in your records where Lyndon refers to Churchill's visit with Truman? I don't think there was any such thing as a state dinner or an entertainment of any sort, because Truman had moved out of the White House and into Blair House.

G: I'll check that.

J: But I remember Lyndon's towering admiration for Churchill.

G: What did he say about Churchill, do you recall?

J: Oh, he just thought he was the glue that held the country of England together, and indeed, the glue that held the free world together. But nothing original about that thought, but he was just one of those who shared it very strongly, and you've heard him tell over and over I'm sure that story about Churchill's drinking, and "so much there is yet to do."

All this time it's pretty depressing to look backward and see what looms up big and what looms up trivial, and to know how little I knew at the time. For instance, China was becoming Communist China. Chiang Kai-shek was being pushed and pushed and

pushed. I think that was the year he finally went to Formosa. We knew about it, but just really didn't know the magnitude of the force that was happening in that enormous country.

I guess what Lyndon felt about civil rights was sort of summarized in what he had told Virginia Durr, that "we will do it when we can get the votes," and also in a letter that he wrote Sam Low. Sam Low was reporting to him what various constituents felt about it. Lyndon wrote him back and said, "We want to accomplish the same ends, but my ideas on how to reach those goals is vastly different. I think my position is somewhat like that of President Roosevelt. He always stated his purposes in the field of civil rights, but he never sought to achieve this part of his program by compulsion and force." I guess it was because you could push it and lose it. If it was not winnable, then you had better wait until the time when it became winnable.

G: Do you think there was also the question of placing himself, say, in jeopardy with re-election if he did something that was that unpopular?

J: I am sure there was, and it would have been. It would definitely, as many of the things that he did, placed him in jeopardy. For instance, I think out of the Texas delegation when the minimum wage law came up, and I think it was some large sum like twenty-five cents an hour? Was that what it was? Or forty-five?

G: I guess it was. Something under a dollar.

J: Oh, yes. And I think maybe it was twenty-five cents. It would be interesting to know. There were three Texas congressmen who voted for it, and Lyndon was the only one who survived it. Maury Maverick was defeated, and the senator from Wichita Falls whose

name I don't recall right--McFarlane I think, was defeated and Lyndon alone survived it. So he did dare some highly controversial things, and got by with them, and gradually, I think, led people along with him. He did not feel that civil rights could be attained at this time. Nor I suppose did he have the spur that later comes to you when you're in the presidency. You know you can't blame it on anybody else; there's not ninety-six people to divide it between--or a hundred people. You're up there all by yourself. And then you have to answer to whatever you think is truly right.

Certainly one important thing that loomed--that was visible then to us and perceived by us as important, and so remembered today, was the North Atlantic Pact, the NATO treaty. It was being signed by twelve nations, stressing the fact that it was defensive, and denying that it was pointed against Russia but still a show of united strength. That was a time when we had a lot of food commodities in storage, and when price support loans were a big part of legislation.

Another one of those stag affairs was the White House Correspondents Dinner. As I got back through this, if I ever do, I'll try to make a more coherent list of such things.

Another embassy that we went to, and this time actually for a black tie dinner, honoring Vice President [Alben] Barkley, was at the French Embassy, partly because of the character of Henri Bonnet and Madame Bonnet, the ambassador and his wife, who were just so widely popular personally. Of course Lyndon did it I'm sure very much to please me, and it sure did.

Lynda Bird's birthday was always a--and Luci's by the time she became three or so--were big events and we'd have the children of our staff. For instance, on this one,

when Lynda was five years old--let's see, yes, I think she was five that year, March 19--there were two little Connallys there, Kathleen and Johnny, and Patty Nichols, Dorothy's little girl, and Beth Jenkins, and Nicky Cook, the Don Cooks' child, and Scott Carpenter and Lera Thomas, who was Albert and Lera's little girl, Marta Miller. I'm afraid there was nothing terribly original about them, just wacky hats and a big cake and anxious mothers. (Laughter) But I have them duly recorded on film, and sometimes show them to my grandchildren without the applause that I think they're due.

Vice President and Mrs. Barkley were very popular and very likeable. All the clubs in town would have a party for them, the Congressional Club, just a general sort of routine of parties.

Now, I'm getting into April, and I wonder if we're going to have a little walk, we had better be about it.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XXIV]

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LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of

CLAUDIA TAYLOR JOHNSON

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, I, Claudia Taylor Johnson of Austin, Texas, do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recordings and transcripts of the personal interviews conducted with me and prepared for deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. A list of the interviews is attached.

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.

(5) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be deposited in or loaned to other institutions.

Claudia Taylor Johnson 6/20/02

Claudia Taylor Johnson Date

by Patti Howell

Allen Fawcett 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.

Assistant Archivist
For Presidential Libraries

Mrs. Johnson's Oral History Interviews:

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

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