

INTERVIEW WITH MRS. JOHNSON
ON HER ROLE AS FIRST LADY

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INTERVIEWEE: MRS. LYNDON B. JOHNSON
INTERVIEWER: Nancy Smith
PLACE: LBJ Library, Austin, Texas

S: One thing I found in the files and wanted to get your reaction to is a draft, I guess to President Johnson, that you did on his stand on the issue of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Delegation seating in 1964. I thought it was an unusual issue for you to be advising him on, and I wanted to know if you remembered anything about it. Do you remember President Johnson's asking you to give him a draft? Jack Valenti also gave him one, too.

J: No, frankly, I don't but this says very well my feelings and what I had observed as his feelings and actions ever since 1957 which was a very dramatic time--and not very well known any longer--and I'm pleased to see this.

S: Yes, I found it very interesting and I'm going to highlight it in the article because I'm trying to show all the different issues that you were involved in, and there were so many. But I really didn't know that you got involved in the issue of seating the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Delegation.

J: Well, let me say "cared about" and had "opinions about"--not necessarily "involved" in advising. If he asked me I sure didn't mind expressing my feelings.

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S: I'd assume for you to draft something like this he probably asked you?

J: He certainly would have.

S: I just wanted to show you that right away because I thought it was so important.

Let's start out with when you first became First Lady. Did you have any sort of historical ideas in terms of what you felt that role required?

J: No, frankly, because you will remember the hideous advent of us into the presidency. Nothing had been contemplated or prepared for--just the most violent and awful beginning, and I sensed something like, I walked on stage for a role I had never rehearsed. Well, it is just very clear, if you are in public life as the wife of a Congressman or a Senator or a Vice President, your main effort is one to make it comfortable, peaceful place for your husband to work and prepare--just carry all the heavy load of public service. And then beyond that you find your niche, beyond helping him. No, at first, I had no idea what my role would be except to ease Mrs. Kennedy's burdens if I could.

S: When you did become aware of things that you wanted to do--probably after the 1964 election--and started deciding what your role was going to be, did President Johnson help you in picking your three main areas of interest: beautification, education and children?

J: Not helped me, but supported me and applauded me and made me think I could do more than I actually could. He was a natural born Henry Higgins--he was always working on any of his secretaries, his wife,

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his daughters, the people he cared about. If he thought they had potential he wanted them to use it to the utmost.

S: He didn't really help you in terms of saying, "Well, I'd like you to get involved in Head Start," or "I'd like you to do something with Beautification"?

J: No, no, no, those things just naturally came about. What did I see in his legislation? What was there so evident on the nation's agenda that particularly struck a responsive chord in me? What made my heart sing? What did I think I could do and wanted to do? And Head Start was obviously it seemed to me the point at which you had the most chance of breaking the cycle of poverty by beginning a good education and by beginning some health attention--attention to health and some care.

Then in a speech that he made in Michigan early in 1965 I don't remember exactly when, but it is important enough for me to. . . .

S: May 22, 1964, the University of Michigan Great Society speech? Could that be it?

J: Well, it was 1964? It wasn't 1965? At any rate, whenever he made that speech, heavily underlined in it, running through it very strong, was the environment. This was sort of the beginning it seemed to me of the great wave of interest in the environment: clean air, clean rivers, wilderness, inner-city parks, just the whole big ball of interwoven skeins--that you can't just pull one out and say it is all national parks. It is all getting rid of pollution. Anyhow it is an interwoven skein of a great import, that we helped walk it on to the

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stage--as a sort of midwife. It was right down my alley because nature had given me more joy and serenity and good days and happy memories - just seeing, walking in the woods and floating down the rivers and just remembering the scenes in the national parks. So I decided that certainly was going to be one of my things and it found its expression in the beautification program in Washington simply because that's where we lived. You begin where you are and for the next predictable whatever it was, after 1965 it was four years to predict, barring dying or something--you begin where you are and you hope it has ripple effect, set some kind of chain-reaction, some kind of standards maybe, anyhow that's what I allied myself with great excitement and pleasure. When Lyndon became so concerned about the balance of payments, one of the things--we did talk about this together--he'd say was, "I wish people would take their vacations in the United States. I wish they'd put off going to Europe for one, two, three years and just go see the far places in this great country that they may not know." So National Parks made up a list of these wonderful parks and I had some marvelous trips and one of the most fun was to the Big Bend National Park and of course, over and over to the Grand Tetons. Oh how I loved that!

S: Did you delight in subjecting the press to this? And making them all go down on the rafts?

J: Well, actually, I think they came to regard it as quite an interesting venture, and I think they enjoyed doing it. Of course, they were the

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form of expression to the public so we needed their interest and if they didn't get involved the public wouldn't know about it.

S: So there you were really using the press and your role as First Lady to highlight President Johnson's programs.

J: Yes, I used them the best I could. We all used each other.

S: I've read that for a long, long time before you became First Lady you did not like making speeches, you did not like campaigning. Did President Johnson encourage you to become involved in the 1964 campaign? Did he like you to make speeches or did you just feel after a while that this was part of the job that you had to do?

J: The latter, sort of. I never did feel easy about it. It was always-- you had to "screw your courage to the sticking point." Where is that from?

S: I don't know.

J: I think it is Shakespeare, but I don't know. But anyhow, you just say "I have to, and so I will." Fortunately a year or two before that, I had taken a lesson in public speaking, a course in public speaking. It was given in the Capitol by a delightful woman named Provenson, I believe it was Hester Provenson, and one of the most useful things I ever did because it made you understand so much that I didn't understand before. Lots of interesting women did it, diplomats' wives, Senators' wives, and you just found yourself with a coterie of companions and learning a new skill. None of it really took away the unease and the scariness of it, but it helped. And I can't say that he particularly encouraged me, but he did make me understand that it was

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a help to him. If the candidate couldn't be everywhere and respond to every request, if he could send his wife, or indeed, one of his daughters, that was something of a gesture of interest and caring to that group.

S: Knowing that you did have this hesitancy I've just been fascinated with your all of a sudden undertaking the Whistle Stop Campaign, and going down into the South right after the 1964 Civil Rights Act had been passed. Who suggested it? Why did you undertake it? Were you worried about doing it?

J: Yes, of course I was worried about doing it. But I have a strong sentimental, family, deep tie to the South and I thought the South was getting a bad rap from the nation and indeed the world, sort of painted as a bastion of ignorance and prejudice and all sorts of ugly things. It was my country, and although I knew I couldn't be all that persuasive to them, at least I could talk to them in language they would understand and maybe together we could do something to help Lyndon and then perhaps to change the viewpoint of some of those newspaper people who were traveling with me. And it was a marvelous adventure, utterly exhausting. I never saw anything more courageous than Congressman Hale Boggs from Louisiana, getting up and standing by Lyndon and espousing civil rights when all of his own constituents could just tar and feather him for doing it. But there were a lot of people in the South who did know that we were going down there and we must march with the times and put this behind us and free ourselves of

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the burden of prejudice, so we were just daring to take up something. It was uncomfortable. I do not think it was dangerous.

S: It was a real trial by fire to begin your real public speaking that way. Do you remember, did you come up with that idea or did President Johnson or Liz?

J: I think it probably was more or less spontaneous combustion. But I think that everyone, and particularly Liz, was a part of it.

S: I have found some memos from Liz to you where she is saying, "Let's go down to the South," and I was wondering whether the idea sort of originated there?

J: She's a very daring person and it would have been just like her. I think she did more to seed the ground than anybody.

S: And was President Johnson pleased with that idea?

J: Yes, yes, he was.

S: Did you develop the idea and then go to him, or did you immediately, when you first got the idea, talk it over with him and get his reading on going?

J: Lord knows, I don't remember. It just all sort of germinated and grew. I do remember a good deal about the preparation. For instance, he did say to me, "Now you must let every Governor know, and every Senator know, that you're coming into their state, and tell them that you would be so pleased if they found it possible to join you on the train as you went through their state, at any portion of the time." And I did, every last one of them, my own self, scared to death, and I really got some very varied responses. Some courageous responses, and

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some responses that were folks just having lots to do other places.

Everyone was thoroughly courteous.

S: My husband is from Mississippi, and I imagine you didn't get Governor Paul Johnson with you?

J: No. He and Lyndon had been friends in another time and manner as I remember. I just don't really remember about him.

S: I don't really know the answer to that question.

J: I don't either, but I know that every one of them was wonderfully courteous in a southerner's time. I liked it.

S: When you became First Lady, is there a person in the State Department or the White House--someone who briefs you on the protocol and the customary arrangements for various social functions?

J: Absolutely. First you have, hopefully, a good Social Secretary. In my opinion I had just the best, Bess Abell. Then there is the wife of the Chief of Protocol--and I can't imagine a bachelor being the Chief of Protocol--it is likely for them to undertake to do that, too. The one that we had was Robin Duke--Angie Biddle Duke's wife--who was President Kennedy's Chief of Protocol and stayed on for a year or so, I forget how long, as ours, and was very knowledgeable and skillful. It was her world. The State Department always furnished you with bios of every visiting chief of State and members of his family or party. Then I would get the National Geographic map, which I had--a wonderful set of maps given to Lyndon earlier--hanging upstairs on the third floor of the White House, I remember the exact spot. I'd just go up and pull down that particular country and take a good long look at

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what its neighbors were, what it looked like, its placement in the world. The State Department always sent you briefings on what its geographic, economic, social--its problems and what was going on there.

S: And did you always read those before--?

J: Oh you bet!

S: And then they also sent you briefings about the various heads of state?

J: Yes, bios of their heads of state and their party, yes.

S: I know a lot of people just think of the Head of State dinners as sort of a social function, but do you think they have a little bit more important purpose than that?

J: Well, certainly. The conferences and the talks, whether one-on-one or six-on-six or whatever they were, between the President and the Head of State are quite important. And the dinner is a matter of respect and hospitality and hope that you will meet diverse people not only from the government but from around the United States in fields of interest to you. You'd bone up on learning about the country and the chief of state, and then you'd try to flock the guest list somewhat accordingly. The State Department sends you a bunch [of names], and you'd have your own personal friends. Lyndon always had a roster from the House and Senate and a lot of suggestions from people in his administration who he knew were interested. You'd frequently find some kinsman of the visiting chief of state, for instance, let's say the King of Nepal's son was going to Harvard and we had him down on

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such-and-such, the Ambassador who had been stationed in that country in years past and had become friendly with the President or monarch and you'd have him. You did your best to add whatever personal element. There was one King who was particularly fond of jazz music so we had that as the entertainment. I think maybe it was the King of Thailand, and some were skillful aviators, whatever their role in life.

S: Did you like this part, because I think it is such a necessary part of being First Lady, did you like the social function of First Lady?

J: Oh yes. I liked it just fine. I found it very frustrating to have only one language. I only speak English and that I think was a big drawback. It is one of the things that is a very sizeable asset to be able to converse in two or three languages. And also I argued against and felt sorry about the fact that those poor Chiefs of State would often not have any time to rest before they got pitched in to talks with the President or a series of social events. It might be two o'clock in the morning according to their stomach time and I think it would have been so good if they could have had 48 hours. Finally I think it became more and more customary to have perhaps 24 hours [to rest]. I think they did this in Williamsburg.

S: Did Jacqueline Kennedy give you any advice or any tips about being First Lady, and did you pass any advice or tips on to Mrs. Nixon? Dr. Gould's essay is going to focus in on the institution of the office of First Ladies and we're sort of interested in whether there

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is any informal transitionary sort of notes between one First Lady and another?

J: There has always I expect, there was in our case, a tour of the White House. We took Mrs. Nixon through twice I think, once with the President for lunch and the girls along--well, at least once, maybe twice. In Mrs. Kennedy's case, once more you would not have had a tour under the circumstances, so it wasn't quite like that but she had me over to tea and she had prepared a memorandum on--I remember very well, it was a handwritten memo and it was on a yellow legal pad. It was quite a few pages and I hope it reposes safely in the archives?

S: We have it.

J: About things that she had done in regard to the White House. That was her love, restoring the White House. No doubt she would have had many other loves had she been there longer, but she really wanted me to safeguard that, continue that. Her words really fell on fertile ground because I cared deeply about it, although from a different viewpoint, because I wasn't really knowledgeable about 18th century furniture or anything like that. My main drive was to get American artists represented in the White House and I did. I'm so delighted to say that [I got] quite a few of them: Mary Cassatt, Winslow Homer, Sully, Prendergast, and a Thomas Cole--I believe one of the Hudson River painters who went west and did eight scenes of what had become the national parks of the west.

S: So you continued to work on White House preservation--actually it became the Committee for the Preservation of White House back in 1964.

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J: And we shored it up with some legal backing--an Executive Order.

S: An Executive Order in 1964--does that still continue? Did Mrs. Nixon have it?

J: Yes, I do not know for sure but I'm about 99 per cent sure that it still continues vigorously.

S: I think that that group is interesting because it is one of the sort of official organizations attached to the First Lady.

J: Yes I was never so scared in my life as when I met the group for the first time but they just turned out to be marvelously interesting.

S: Why were you scared?

J: Because they belong to a world that I didn't belong to. I mean most of them are terrifically knowledgeable in their own fields, and Mr. Harry DuPont, you know, one of the greatest authorities in the U.S, probably the dean of knowledge about early American furniture and art, et cetera. But I really think I left there with some good friends in that field.

S: And I think you did a lot of wonderful things getting more Americana into the White House. And you were also very interested in the White House Film Library weren't you? That was another love of yours, I think.

J: Yes. In that I wanted what we did there and the trips I took to be recorded on film as a source of research. I just had great fun going on that raft down the Rio Grande and I think it is fun to look back at the pictures. We happened to be associated with a marvelous Japanese, an American citizen, but of Japanese descent, photographer, Okamoto,

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who did just months and months of intimate shots of what a President does.

S: Did you ever feel that being First Lady took too much time away from your family? I've read some comments by you that in fact you felt that the White House brought your family closer together.

J: It did. Indeed it did because--well, because physically and psychologically--physically my husband had never in his whole life come home to lunch and now since he was just--well, the Mansion and the office are connected by corridors and it was the closest place and certainly the place he cared most about. We prepared what he wanted so he would just come over and keep right on working, bringing staff members or guests and then hopefully would get a little nap or rest in the afternoon. He was physically at home more and we did more things together. And then the children--this, I'm sure could be very hard on them. I do think the opportunities far outweigh the strain and so I wanted to expose them to all the opportunities and you can't buffer them from the strain. If they've got ears, they're going to hear that shouting outside that window of objections to the war in Vietnam and that is very painful particularly in the last year when each of them have a husband over there. But they also got to see this great country in a marvelous way in which they met a lot of people and had a lot of doors opened to them which wouldn't have been otherwise. This was an expanding experience. So you would have to be a clod, unfeeling, unseeing, not to enjoy being in that position. You also

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suffered but in reality it is a more complete human being if you can have both joy and suffering, so you sure don't ever have boredom.

S: When Julie Nixon Eisenhower was here, she said that it was often very lonely in the White House. She felt that her mother was occasionally very lonely as First Lady. I guess she meant this when you took a controversial stand. Did you ever feel that? Sort of lonely?

J: No, not really. I did feel an acute separation from a lot of my friends, particularly southern friends because we were really flying right in their teeth with civil rights. But Lyndon, and this is something I don't think is quite ever emphasized enough, was just as anxious for civil rights to be reasonably advanced and pushed forward for the sake of the white man as for the sake of the black man because if you carry that kind of a load--I'm not going to use the word guilt --it was an economic burden to the South and it was a burden to be so regimented by that attitude toward blacks. And I think [saying] we shall lay that down was kind of a release for white people as well as for black people.

But you asked me if I felt lonely--no, not really. I felt a sense of estrangement and sorrow but I always felt like we'll come around together.

S: Did you feel that sense of estrangement on the Vietnam War or was that feeling stronger in 1967 and 1968 when you would go out to make speeches?

J: Yes, you wondered where all those young people were that were holler-ing so madly, angrily. They wouldn't have been at college in the

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first place if it weren't for the prosperity of the country that we were happily able to be a part of and to work toward in every way we could. But they just didn't understand, and also, one of the sort of wry things about it was during the first two or three years, you would see your audience kind of rustling in the seats and sort of frowning, maybe clapping a little bit, like wet fish, when you were talking about civil rights and then you got to talking about preserving freedom around the world--you know those magnificent lines from the Kennedy speech about we would bear any burden, pay any price, for the survival of freedom around the world. I can't quote it exactly but it went something like that and you could just get started on that and the flags would wave and people shout, "Right on", "Go on," and, well, sentiments change. It was a long hard war, it was an undeclared war, you fought it--it was fought in the living room by the medium of television. I don't think there will ever be another war like that. If we ever got, heaven help us, into anything else--and may the Lord forbid it--it had sure better be preceded by an Alamo or a Pearl Harbor, so that there is a clear-cut declaration in the beginning and coalescing of the American people.

S: I think that you were one of President Johnson's closest and most trusted advisers and I was wondering if you could give me one or two instances or stories that would show you giving him advice or support in terms of legislation. I was thinking of the Highway Beautification Act when I know that you called some Congressmen to help get that passed or maybe on Medicare. I think you were very interested in that

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because of Mary Lasker and she was very interested. I thought maybe you could give one or two examples where you got very involved in legislation.

J: No, everybody knew how I felt and I sure didn't mind expressing myself. I made it a point to thank everybody who was our ally in those two things. But as for going to those who were opposed to it and trying to present the case and reason with them and urge them, I did not think that was my place, my role, and I'm just not an aggressive person so I didn't, for better or worse. I think one of the few times I was just darned positive what Lyndon ought to do was that he ought to run in August of 1964, or whenever that convention was, and that he ought not to run four years later, and that was a firm conviction from which I never did waver and which I wrote to him, in those memos you may have read, my feelings.

S: How do you feel being First Lady changed you--the experience? I assume you became a lot more comfortable with making public appearances.

J: Well, yes, I think I did because I just found out that it was so obvious that all you could do was to do your best, and, indeed, there were a great many other people who--that big scary world was all it was, full of people who might not be any more sure of themselves than I was or any more confident.

Lyndon used to say something--he'd say, "It's not hard to do what is right, courage is something that you can come by, but to know what is right when it is gray and foggy and all mixed up and

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you can make good arguments on both sides and good advisers do make arguments on both sides, to know which path is right is very hard." How did it change me? I think it has expanded me greatly, I had to grow, I really came to know this country so much better and really the main result was just that it increased my faith and optimism about the country.

S: Were you pleased with all that you were able to accomplish with the Committee for a More Beautiful Capital? It turned Washington into a beautiful city.

J: Yes, I just loved it, just loved those people, they were wonderful fellow-workers. I loved those trips around in buses to see the things we'd done and I bemoan those times that some things got vandalized or went unappreciated. Just cheered those times when they were enjoyed and made our city a lovelier place.

S: It really did. I'm a Washingtonian, and it really did make it a beautiful city. You used the media, I mean by use, that you got very good press and I was wondering if you felt that mainly during your administration as First Lady that the press was a positive one or did you view it as sort of a negative barrier? Did you feel that it was something you could use effectively or did you sort of dread the press or feel like--?

J: Well, let me say right now, I think that they were better to me than I deserved and I think I left there with some good friends among them.

End of Tape and End of Interview

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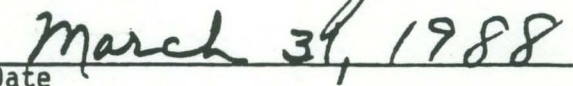
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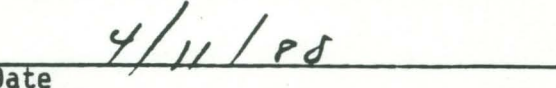
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