

INTERVIEW XLIII 1960

DATE: January 23, 1996

INTERVIEWEE: LADY BIRD JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: HARRY MIDDLETON

PLACE: Acapulco, Mexico

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

M: This is tape number one, recorded in January 1996 with Lady Bird Johnson. We are half way into the year 1960.

That microphone is not going to pick me up, but it doesn't make any difference. We are right in the [Democratic National] Convention of 1960. Right at the point that Governor [David] Lawrence is going to nominate LBJ for the vice presidency. And in previous discussions we've talked about your--*you* have talked about--your reactions leading up to the Convention. How did you feel when he was nominated, and by acclamation on the first ballot, for vice president?

J: Oh, it was sort of like trying to swallow a nettle: hurt, sticky, spiny. He didn't want the job, but he felt an enormous sense of obligation to the Democratic Party. It had given him, us, every honor it could. Wearing the flag for a Democratic Party as a member of the House of Representatives, and as senator and he--it's hard for anybody now to understand how people felt then. There was a sense of party loyalty, of obligation, of belonging because you wanted to belong, and of loyalty that it imposed. And then he had to look at the job of majority leader he had *loved*. He reveled in it. But it wouldn't be the

Johnson -- XLIII -- 2

same if he went back--if he didn't accept that nomination and went back and tried to continue as majority leader because that person, if the president and the majority in the Congress both belonged to the same party, according to Lyndon's beliefs you should be a loyal. You should try to do the president's bidding to carry his wood and water, and Lyndon would no longer be in that ideal position he had been in with [Dwight] Eisenhower where he could be with him and for him every time his proposals were for the good of the country, as Lyndon believed, and be against the legislation if he thought it wasn't best for the country. He didn't have that option any more.

And he liked, always, and respected President [John F.] Kennedy. But he was not necessarily--well, he was the not the sort of member of that team who would just be prepared to happily and whole-heartedly espouse every piece of legislation.

That's my feeling. And I know it's not the general feeling. So it just is a silly little thing to say anything different and totally unlikely to sway anybody, but from a close up position, and the way I felt, the way I thought Lyndon felt, it was a hard thing to do, to leave the job he'd had and enjoyed, and to take this lesser job.

But, Lyndon feared that the Democratic Party would lose, [Richard] Nixon would win, and the Democratic Party would be out for years and years. And so he opted for doing what he thought of as a duty, and accepting the nomination. That Governor Lawrence nominated him was a pleasant thing for Lyndon because Lawrence of Pennsylvania--isn't that right? Wasn't it? Governor--?

M: Yes.

J: --was one of the old time Democratic politicians: sturdy, respected, high class, fine man

Johnson -- XLIII -- 3

in Lyndon's book.

And so he did. And the reaction among some of our close friends was very painful. I think John Connally got in his car with Nellie and started driving immediately back to Texas. I don't know whether that's correct or not. Sometimes I'm going back and really see. Even Walter Jenkins, he belonged to the "boy stood on the burning deck" school. Even Walter--I think he started to leave; maybe he did. Everybody had bet on [the] chance that Lyndon might get the nomination for president and they were completely wholehearted, all except in my feeling, Lyndon, on that. And when he didn't, they just thought it's time to go home, and get back to our life.

M: The feeling on the part of many of his supporters that he should not take that; that feeling belonged to another time, seems far distant now. But a lot of it--because of that time, a lot of that had to do with the fact that Texas was not a very liberal state.

J: It was not. You know, one of the real questions, one of the funny things is that Lyndon got to be--got as far as he did in Texas, because Texas is a very conservative state, and Lyndon, as he said, was fiscally conservative, but not socially conservative. I think that partly it was because Lyndon was six feet three and wore a Stetson, and folks would say, "Well, old Lyndon, he does some funny things, but he sure does love Texas." (Laughter)

M: How did you yourself feel about his taking it? You obviously had a great sense of how he felt. But how did you yourself feel about it?

J: Well, I didn't want him to. But I was not the fellow that was going to have to do the job, bear the burden. So I just really drew back from trying to influence anything. I did not know which was right. But this was so new and strange and such a break with much in

Johnson -- XLIII -- 4

our past, I really didn't want to. But I wanted him to do what he must do.

M: When he made his acceptance speech, I remember one line from it, I think everyone probably does, "I'm proud to stand beside, and stand behind, Jack Kennedy."

J: Yes, and he really felt that way. Kennedy, not everybody around him, not everything related to him, but on balance, he had a great respect and admiration for Kennedy.

M: The reason I'm talking a little louder than I need to is so that I can get into your microphone over there. It's not the way I talk to Jake Pickle. Not the reason that I talk loud to him.

After that you went back to the Ranch. I don't know that this is all terribly important, but the information here is that you went back with Lynda and Luci, and a group of the staff, to the Ranch, and some of the President's family came back. Do you remember anything about that? Was it a let down feeling, or an exhilarating feeling, or anything like that?

J: Oh, it was let down and strange. But a whole bunch of neighbors came and welcomed us, and there was a lot of pumping of hands and slapping of back and a lot of show of affection. And even that, too, was funny, because here we were, about half of that county--the part going to the west towards Fredericksburg was *thoroughly* German, and they were not pro-Democratic Party. Not many liberal bones in any of them. I think the only time Lyndon ever carried that area was in 1964, as it turned out. But because they was neighbors, they lived with him, they knew him. They tolerated him, [as] different as he was. (Laughter)

M: Then you went, from there, you went with a group, including the [Homer] Thornberrys

Johnson -- XLIII -- 5

and some other staff people, came down here to Acapulco, and stayed at President [Miguel] Alemán's house. Do you remember anything about that at all?

J: Well, it all appeared a time of strangeness to me. I thought the house, the surroundings, everything was just so glamorous, and so inviting, but I couldn't really enjoy it, and Lyndon couldn't either, because he hadn't quite made his peace with his own future. That nettle was scratching and hurting as he tried to swallow it and digest it.

M: And the press descended on you at that point.

J: Yes.

M: And I imagine that that was--well, the Diary says that the President was somewhat displeased about the fact--(Laughter)

J: I imagine that was an understatement. (Laughter)

M: But let's get back--that soon--later that month, August 27, the Republican Convention met. Was it any surprise to you and to the President that they nominated Nixon?

J: Oh, no, no. I think that was always in the cards. And that might have been a part of the reason for Lyndon accepting the vice presidential nomination.

And I want to make it real clear it's not that he looked *down* on working *under* Kennedy, or looked *down* on the vice presidency. It just wasn't anything he wanted or had ever aspired to, and he had to kind of wrestle himself to do it.

M: You went, speaking right in line with that, soon after the Republican nomination, you went with the President and other staff members to Hyannis Port [Massachusetts]. Was that your first trip there?

J: Yes. My first trip to any kind of what might have been an intimate association with

Johnson -- XLIII -- 6

living in New England, living in that area, and with folks for whom that was their life.

M: And were the Kennedys pretty hospitable?

J: Yes. And I imagine--they were. And although, you know, we were strange to most of them, not to President Kennedy. He and Lyndon had been together in the Senate, for how long was it? Some little time anyway.

M: But your own relationship to Mrs. Kennedy changed in this, too. You had been a senior member of the Senate wives. You had befriended her when she was a young person. Now, all of a sudden, you were in a kind of a junior position to her.

J: Yes.

M: Did that come with any kind of discomfort to you?

J: Not in the least. For one thing, I do not have an overweening personal ambition--to see the world and have interesting experiences, yes, but to have titles and position, no.

M: A blockbuster. (Laughter)

J: And I remember how her sister was there with her. And they were so congenial. And I think one of the things we did at that time--she was a photographer as everybody knows, and she got out an album, just to show the visitor, me, some of the pictures she had taken of her darling little girl, and they were really so precious. And they--it was sort of a close family life that we were butting in on. And her sister was married to a titled European [Stanislaw Albrecht Radziwill].

M: Radziwill.

J: Radziwill. Rumania? Poland?

M: Polish.

Johnson -- XLIII -- 7

J: Poland.

M: Was he there too?

J: Oh yes, he was walking around sort of looking like he was in the zoo. (Laughter)

I mean, "These people, what are they?" Well, you know, it was pandemonium.

Press everywhere. You could reserve, if you were tough enough, maybe a little privacy, but anyhow they were trying to be invasive.

M: Was this your first meeting with Rose Kennedy, or had you known her before?

J: I think it was my first meeting.

M: And the Ambassador?

J: Yes.

M: What was your own reaction to them?

J: Well, intense interest. Anybody that's got *nine* children, and has been the wife of the ambassador to the other leading country of the world. There's lots about them to be beglamored about.

And I thought also that although he appeared to me then and always--Mr.

Kennedy the head of the family--as being a *pretty* strong dominate autocrat, but yet I thought that lady had her own particular sort of indomitable strength. I was terribly impressed every step of the way.

M: It doesn't sound as if there was any kind of discomfort in your--

J: Not any on my part. And I did so want to make it any easier for Jacqueline Kennedy if I could, because she--you sort of sensed that this was not what she had expected to do with her life. That she was in a strange new world, even as I was in strange new world. And

Johnson -- XLIII -- 8

well, she was, always, somebody who was appealing. You wanted to help her.

M: Were you and she on [a] first-name basis?

J: I think so.

M: And did that remain that way.

J: Yes. And the way she pronounced my name was always just so intriguing, I thought, sort of "Lay-dee Bird." (Laughter)

M: How about Senator Kennedy, were you on a first name basis with him?

J: Well, I wouldn't have from the moment he became the nominee. I was on a "Senator Kennedy" basis, I would say. But then that's just sort of my--I'm likely to say--use titles. I just, even Mr. or Mrs. until I know people real well. It's just a habit.

M: This trip would not have been your first meeting with Robert Kennedy, would it? Or might it have been?

J: I think so. I don't really remember.

M: He came to the LBJ Ranch once while President Johnson was Majority Leader, but there is no indication that you were there at that time. So I wonder if this would be your first meeting with him.

J: I think so. I couldn't say for sure.

M: This is as good a place as any to ask you: how did you feel about him, about Robert Kennedy?

J: I felt there was a hostility on his part, as though he sensed some possible strength that he thought it would be best to combat, that is, in Lyndon. On the other hand--well, wasn't any need in me trying to be hostile too. Lyndon could take care of himself.

Johnson -- XLIII -- 9

And I remember one time at the White House, this was months and months later, maybe, yes, I guess it was three years later, or more, when Lyndon himself was president, and my interest in the environment, ecology, beautification--bad phrase, never did get over it--was very much talked about in the press and that was sort of my signature and everybody thought of me as doing almost exclusively that. And he was sort of lightly, and not obviously, making fun of that. And I thought, "Well I'll just look up at him as innocent as I can and say, 'But there are so many of us.'" I mean *lots* of people just love the world around them, nature, sort of a big word for an intimate feeling. (Laughter) But I never felt any need to defend myself, Lyndon's self. He was a feisty man, and strong sense of family loyalty, and all of that is good.

M: Was he the only member of the Kennedy family, the Kennedy entourage, that you detected that sense of hostility in?

J: I think so. Never, certainly, in Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy, although, it's easy to see, she and I came from different worlds, socially--well, different worlds.

Mine was country girl, loving being a country girl. Certainly not used to elegant living, but always I had been the daughter of the biggest man, so to speak, in our village, in our county in East Texas. Well, goodness knows, I didn't know a *fauteuil* from a *bergère*. I mean, elegance in living had not been a part of my life.

M: Since we brought up the subject of Robert Kennedy, go back to the nomination. It's not in here, and you would not have encountered it in these notes, but there has been a lot of discussion about how Bobby Kennedy objected to the selection of Lyndon Johnson by the President-elect as his running mate. Do you have any memory of that exchange at all?

Johnson -- XLIII -- 10

J: I heard it in those days. And certainly it makes you sort of bristle, but his own feelings are what concerned Lyndon mostly. And his feeling was that maybe, just maybe, if he put everything he had into it, he might weigh the balance and he might produce a victory for-- he might carry Texas, might carry some Southern states for Kennedy, for the ticket.

M: An indication of how strong the feeling was in Texas among even some of your friends and supporters must have come in August when the Vice President-elect telephoned Oveta Culp Hobby to ask for support, and she told him she could not support a Kennedy-Johnson ticket.

J: Right, and it did; it was a blow. But an almost expected blow. Texas is a conservative state. And although he could honestly claim her as a friend, she's not the sort of friend that would go into battle with you. If she didn't believe like you believed, you certainly wouldn't be working shoulder to shoulder in a cause.

M: How about George Brown at this time? Did he sign on as a supporter?

J: Yes. My memory is that he did. They were really close, affectionate, joyous friends and they liked working together.

M: Incidentally, this has nothing to do with that, but it's interesting to me that George Brown, in my experience, is the only person I know who always called you "Claudia."

J: And so do his daughters, to this day and I have to be sure to remember to sign myself "Claudia" when I write them a letter.

M: On the President's birthday, there was a surprise birthday party for him in the old Supreme Chamber. Were you there at that time? Do you remember about it? The Diary says that he was visibly affected by the remarks made by Senator [Everett] Dirksen.

Johnson -- XLIII -- 11

J: Oh, yes, yes. You know, I'm just so desperately sorry to say I can't say for sure whether I was there or not. I think I was, unless this thing was just a stag, as many things [were]. That word is not used any more hardly. But lots of things were [stag] in those times. And it was no effort on the part of women, that I remember, to break into purely masculine gatherings. The Senate, of course, at that time, I don't even know whether we had Margaret Chase Smith.

M: You did.

J: We did? Yes.

M: Well, all right, the major events begin now, because you start on a campaign trip. And I'm sure that the campaigns that are most prominent in your mind would be the one that took place four years later. But how about the campaign of 1960. You did a lot of that, and you did it with some of the Kennedy women.

J: Yes.

M: The memories of those campaigns, I think, would be useful to talk about it.

J: There was, yes, there was much that was funny about the campaigns with the Kennedy ladies. There would be, let's see, where there three sisters?

M: Yes.

J: And Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy, I do not believe, went on anyone of them. She was pregnant, she was not well, and added to the fact that this was *very* hard--she had a bigger nettle to swallow than I did, than we did.

And so the party usually consisted as me as sort of a host, and two Kennedy relatives, sisters, one time his mother. And we would go to a series of Texas towns after

Johnson -- XLIII -- 12

having--somebody had preceded us on the road to round up interest in the part of radio, television, newspaper, come and interview, come in and write as big stories they could be enticed to write. And I had the feeling--and I did *so* want those ladies to like and respect and be interested in all these people they were meeting. I've got to say they were very different. (Laughter)

I remember one time we went to some West Texas town and they gave us corsages that were made out of the fruit of the cactus. You know, the prickly pear as a sort of a purple, bulbous-looking thing on it. I think the stickers had been pulled. (Laughter)

It was during that campaign, and it was heightened in every successive campaign, my sense of the vastness, the difference, the regional characteristics of America. It was--oh, my eyes were out on stems. I liked the small town, West Texas, or indeed, almost any portion of Texas better than I did the big crowds, and they were big in Dallas, Houston. Now San Antonio, it's just not possible for me not to like San Antonio in whatever form. And we did a lot of that with the ladies.

M: One of the critical moments in that campaign came when LBJ arranged for Kennedy to meet with a group of ministers in Houston. Do you remember that?

J: Yes, I do. And I remember how proud we were of how well Kennedy comported himself, with such dignity and solid answers that were also very--he said the message we wanted him to say, we hoped he could and would say, and he did it so well. And we were just all--we were all beaming at the newspaper reports and the feeling among all the folks who went.

Johnson -- XLIII -- 13

M: Was Liz Carpenter with you much on these trips?

J: Yes, she was. She was one of chief architects.

M: You know, what I want you to talk about is Dallas, the hostile crowds in Dallas. I think on that one occasion when you were going through the lobby of the--was it the Baker Hotel [Adolphus Hotel] or--when you encountered a group of unfriendly people. Why don't you begin at the beginning of your memory of that. Because I've heard you talk about that before and how slowly the President walked. (Laughter) But it was a very critical part of that campaign.

J: It was. And at first I couldn't believe what I was seeing, because this was a tightly packed, angry crowd, and these were the people that we had represented since January of 1949. And that was--what was that, eleven years by that time? We thought we knew them. Never [had] been a strong hold for us, Dallas had not. Very conservative town, but they'd always been courteous. And we did have some good friends there. And we were going to go a luncheon rally inside the hotel, which was up, as I remember, on sort of a second floor, mezzanine sort of a place.

But we had to cross the street, and enter the lobby, and either get to the elevator, or perhaps it was stairs, and we found that they didn't want to part. They didn't want to give us room to walk. And nearly everybody had a placard up on a stick and waving them. And it was just a sea of mad slogans, and very obvious they didn't like Johnson, couldn't stand Kennedy.

It would be easy to be in a mob and get scared, because it's a kind of an animal feeling there and you just wondered what would it take to rouse them? What would it

Johnson -- XLIII -- 14

take for them to do something really painful, ugly or irreversible? But I was *intensely* interested in everything around me. As I remember, not scared, but well aware of the tensions and of how this could get out of hand.

And then all of a sudden I realized that Lyndon was going slower than he needed to. He could--[was] a pretty big man and he could have just said, "Excuse me please. Excuse me please. We are going up to our engagement," and just almost forcibly have parted the crowd. He didn't.

It dawned on me that since we were in this hell of a position he was going to--he was maybe enjoying it a little bit. Maybe going to let them have their day and show that their day was ugly, and give the press time to record it, and try to use it, in a strange way for his own purposes. And this lunch we were going to was being sponsored in part by a good friend of ours, head of Neiman Marcus store.

M: Stanley Marcus.

J: Stanley Marcus. And I bet you I was looking right face-to-face with a whole lot of his best customers. So it was very brave of him to be hosting it, along with others. This man who was so unpopular, and he was bringing in somebody that was even more unpopular. I guess it was one of the tensest times I've ever lived through.

Finally, we got upstairs and walked into a room where people were clapping, and shouting, and cheering, and a total change. But we were shaken and impressed. I don't think we were ever frightened, but we did realize the hostility of a sizeable, articulate segment of this country to Kennedy, to the Democratic Party, to us.

M: Did the President indicate to you in any way by saying something, or by gesturing, how

Johnson -- XLIII -- 15

you should behave going through that crowd?

J: No, he didn't. Now, there was one moment when, with all those sticks in the air and all those placards, my hat got knocked off. And you know, all women wore hats in those days and they were sort of creations, and we liked to have a lot of, oh, flowers, feathers, birds, stuff, on them. And I was wearing a hat, probably my best hat. And it did get knocked off, and he sort of made something of that. But nobody intended to in my feeling.

M: Did you recognize anybody in the crowd?

J: Yes, I did. And I recognized a man who had run against us before. I think at any rate we had had encounters, and we had always come off well. And that very time he did get elected as Senator. Senator [John] Tower.

M: Senator Tower.

J: And then, a man named [Bruce] Alger, who was the congressman from Dallas. I think he was the very advent of Republicans in our tightly knit delegation. The very first one, I think. And I recognized him there.

M: In retrospect, that was an historic march. It got a great deal of attention in the press. It may well have changed a lot of votes. Were you aware at the time that it was something historic happening?

J: Not really. I was aware that in all of my life I had never been in a situation like that before. I was aware of the power and the fragility of a mob. And there was a sort of a mob situation, feeling. New stuff, ugly stuff. I was aware of it. I did not predict any scope or any future fall out.

Johnson -- XLIII -- 16

M: It was the first time that you had ever encountered anything like that.

J: Absolutely.

M: Not, however the last time.

J: No. (Laughter)

M: Did you and the President talk about it afterwards?

J: Yes. And what hurt me was that these were the people--these were our people, we thought. These were Texans. We worked for them for eleven years, and close to them in another part of the state, as a member of Congress, for longer. But we hadn't realized the depth of the differences. And now do you think we had better go join everybody?

M: That might be a good thing to do. We're going to stop this here.

End of Interview XLIII

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

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

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

CTJ Appendix A -- 2

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