

INTERVIEW IV

DATE: August 20, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: SHARON FRANCIS

INTERVIEWER: DOROTHY PIERCE McSWEENEY

PLACE: Suite 340, Mills Building, 1700 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.,
Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

M: Mrs. Francis, I have come back for just some very concluding remarks today, Wednesday, August 20, 1969. We are again in your offices, this morning at quarter of ten. We have, I think, very thoroughly covered your relations with the Johnsons and the developments and decisions relating to the beautification and conservation undertaken by Mrs. Johnson. We've discussed the District and across the country in her various trips. You've given us a pretty good understanding, I should say a very good understanding, of how the East Wing ran. So, by the way of summation, I'd like to ask you just a few more questions about Mrs. Johnson as first lady, and also some other issues I should say.

I think the first one I'm thinking of, and I'm asking you this primarily because of your own close association with Mr. Udall, who was secretary of the interior, [is] about the developments over the designation of some park lands in the very final days of the administration. I think there have been some reported stories in the press about some friction that developed between Mr. Johnson and Mr. Udall over this. It wasn't some, it was quite a large quantity of park lands that Mr. Johnson, I believe, has a constitutional right to designate.

F: That's right. Turn off the recorder for just a second. I want to get some notes that I have that I think might help. (Interruption)

In answer to your question. In those final days in January, at the time the negotiations, I might say, were going on between Secretary Udall and the President--and I know DeVier Pierson was largely acting in the President's behalf in this matter--I was not involved in it nor did I have any contacts with Secretary Udall about it. In at least one conversation with DeVier I knew that great efforts were being made to try to get something done. In this particular conversation, the date of which I don't have recorded, he was very hopeful that we would have some substantial national monument designations. I think I was as surprised as anyone else peripherally involved with the situation when I read in the press the final size of the designations, which were so very, very small compared to what I knew had been recommended, proposed, studied,

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contemplated by Interior.

Now the first long conversation I had with Stewart Udall when we came over here to Overview, which was the twenty-third of January, was on this subject, which he termed a rupture with the President. He was very worked up about it. He really wasn't thinking of much else and wasn't focusing on much else. He had a large scrapbook of photographs, beautiful and large photographs of all these areas, and sort of carried it under his arm. This is what might have been. I would describe him as part embittered, part confused, part justifying the situation from his point of view, part trying to understand the President and part furious. I'm sure his own account is going to be the best expression of his memory in this regard for the Johnson Library.

I can only say that there were accidental circumstances--the fact that the President got the flu and, thereby, there was not the press opportunity right before Christmas to make this a Christmas gift for the country. Stewart Udall was totally confident and had no reason to doubt or question that the entire package would have gone through. Then he said that after the first of the year it was a different ball game. The context was different, and the whole thing had to be thought in new terms. DeVier kept saying to Udall that the President had reservations and had question marks. Stewart felt that Saturday the eighteenth had to be the day in which the announcement would be made from his own [office]. It had to be in the Sunday papers the day before inauguration. That was the last time and the last chance. A signing ceremony had been scheduled for the seventeenth, and it had been called off.

DeVier called Udall on Saturday and said the President was signing the proposals, and on the strength of that Udall began to get the press releases out from the Department of Interior. And then, this is my quotation from Udall, "Someone jumped the gun with UPI, and the President saw the news coming out over the ticker." Now I don't know whether he knows who jumped the gun or wants to know, and I don't know. But there are so many zealous eager beavers in the press office in the Department of the Interior that I know how very easily that kind of thing could happen. Naturally the President was furious when he had the pen in his hand, but hadn't signed anything, and saw it already coming in over the ticker. Excuse me just a moment. (Interruption)

M: Was Mr. Udall under the impression at this point on Saturday that the whole package would be signed?

F: Yes, he was. That apparently was a very heated telephone conversation. Whether it was in the course of that or some other conversation with the President, two days before the end of the term Udall offered to resign. So it

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clearly was heated. I might say, going back into some history, he had set his heart on it long, long ago. Because I remember doing a research paper for him when Kennedy was alive on all the times that the Antiquities Act had been used, all the times the president had established national monuments, what the political repercussions had been. He clearly was contemplating this use of presidential power from the earliest days of his office.

Then Stewart Udall told me that ten minutes later, after the conversation with the President, DeVier Pierson had called back and said there was a small Venezuelan oil business that the President wanted, and if Udall were able to do something about that import quota then maybe something could be done again on the monuments. Udall did sign this rather minor oil import item, which apparently he hadn't planned to do. But he did it. Then on Monday the President only designated three hundred thousand acres rather than over seven million. So I think Udall felt he'd been dragged into a kind of horse trading that he didn't want to get into in the first place, and even when he played the game and traded he didn't get his end of the bargain.

But on the twenty-third of January, which was still later that week, Udall's mood was, despite his feeling that the situation was unpleasant and that he'd come out with the short end of the stick, he didn't want that to rupture his friendship with Lyndon Johnson. As he spoke to me he said he intended to write the President and intended to write Mrs. Johnson, and he quoted Robert Frost, "Friendship is all." While he was hurt and bruised, he didn't want to--I don't think he worried he'd lose Mrs. Johnson's friendship, but he was worried he would lose President Johnson's.

M: Hadn't Mr. Johnson given Mr. Udall any indication of why it was such a strong cutback, large cutback? What were the questions in his mind, and the reservations?

F: I asked Udall that same question, and he didn't answer. I have an interpretation of my own, which is that he personally was so zealous and so ardent in achieving an objective that he had studied and thought out very well that any questions or obstacles raised he was sure could be overcome, and he didn't take them to heart. Now, I have some further information on that situation, too. The next day, the twenty-fourth of January, I showed Udall the New York Times article which said that other cabinet officers, Wirtz and Cohen particularly had had real difficulties with the President in the final hours. I also reported what all of us in the White House had been keenly aware of, that the President did not want to rock the boat in the final days and in the days of transition.

This we heard numerous times, in numerous ways, that there wasn't going

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to be a great rush of doing all those things by surreptitious fiat in the last hours that couldn't have been done in the democratic process of eight years. Lyndon Johnson felt he wanted to make the transition as smooth and untroubled for the Nixon Administration as possible and not dissipate their initial energies carping and criticizing at impulsive things that he might be doing in the last days. Personally, I had enormous respect for this posture that he took. I think it was the posture of a really great man. Anyway, Udall acknowledged that, but it wasn't as important to him as the package he'd put together.

Then also that day I had lunch with Bob Cahn, reporter of the Christian Science Monitor, who had learned from Sterling Monroe, the assistant to Senator Jackson, that on Monday, inauguration day, President Johnson had called Senator Jackson and asked his opinion of the larger national monument proposal. Jackson had said he approved of the whole thing. Now, President Johnson's calling Jackson clearly means that he was not satisfied that Udall had checked the proposals out carefully enough on the Hill. Udall told me that Wayne Aspinall had objected to the White House, which I'm sure he did; which would be one more step in an eight-year-long series of objections on the part of Wayne Aspinall to anything Stewart Udall did; which goes back to the fact that Wayne at least wanted to be secretary of the interior himself, or if not secretary, that he wanted that young President John Kennedy to consult him as the senior Interior Committee chairman on the merits of different candidates.

Kennedy had not consulted him, and taken a whippersnapper from off his committee named Udall and put him in. Aspinall had never gotten over it. So while Aspinall's objection may have been noted and taken to heart by the President, it was the kind of thing that had happened so long and so often it just rolled like water off Udall's back. That was one of the things one assumed would happen. He also told me that he had explicitly told the President in briefing him that there would be objection from Aspinall, and that this was one moment in history when he didn't have to be conciliated with. He had been so often before in Udall's opinion.

All right. I asked Bob Cahn directly whether the President had made any comments about Udall to Senator Jackson. Cahn said indeed he had, that he'd said the same thing he'd said when Bill Moyers left, which was that he should have fired that so-and-so years ago. So clearly, if the way the President handled the matter was not understandable and offensive to Udall, Udall's behavior was also offensive to the President. When you began to ask me about this situation you made the term at the end of the administration, in the final days before inauguration, I think. I have to say with some sorrow that to my knowledge there's been no communication from Lyndon Johnson to Stewart Udall of any kind subsequently. And to my knowledge Udall's letter has never

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received a reply of any kind.

M: Historically was that such a large amount, Sharon? Since you did this research paper, I'm just curious myself.

F: I don't have the figures before me. The seven million acres proposed by Interior at this point Well, I just don't have the information. I don't want to guess. I think it can be compared quite easily to other designations. There have been some larger.

M: It wasn't so farfetched?

F: No, no.

M: All right.

F: I'd like to make one additional comment. One of the proposed national monuments was in the Sonora Desert, which is in Morris Udall's district. It was one that President Johnson deleted, and Stewart Udall, I think, found that deletion particularly obnoxious. There's a small amount of grazing in the area which would have to be eliminated if it were made a national monument. But it's so minor and it had been so well checked out with Morris Udall, who so heartily approved of it, that if Udall wanted to respect the President's eliminating areas over which there would be some controversy in his opinion the President went entirely too far in that one. Because he knew there wasn't controversy.

M: You mentioned in the course of answering the question about some of the directions or mood about transition between administrations. As I've heard from other people, of course, this was a very strong area on the West Wing. I'm wondering if you can tell me if there were any such directives on the East Wing or contact with Mrs. Nixon's incoming staff.

F: I was surprised at how little contact there was. The directions that we had were as follows. Perhaps I've said this in the tape before, I don't remember whether I did or not. Mrs. Johnson on at least one occasion, if not more, said to wrap up the beautification program, wrap up the Committee for a More Beautiful Capitol, not make any assumptions that these efforts would continue with any White House leadership backing or endorsement. There were some feelers, oh, suggested by Mary Lasker, suggested by Liz to hand over the Committee for a More Beautiful Capitol to Mrs. Nixon, and Mrs. Johnson said, "Absolutely not. If she wants to undertake this she can, but she has to find her thing, what's right for her, what she's comfortable with. I would have felt badly if someone had told me what role I was to play and how I was to play it, and I'm certainly not going to

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do it for anyone else."

She had a very good perspective and a very good detachment about this. Of course, Liz had known Gerry Vander Heuvel for some time. Gerry came in through the East Wing once with her secretary, or perhaps her secretary came in another time. I remember meeting both of them. She came through and met everybody and looked around and in a few minutes was off again. The new social secretary from Kentucky came in. Bess brought her around and introduced her to people. She looked particularly shy and ill at ease, and her visit was most brief and off she went. To what degree Bess and Liz may have briefed their specific successors, they'll be able to say. There was no contact on the part of any of the rest of us with them whatsoever.

M: That's rather interesting. I think in concluding I have some questions about Mrs. Johnson. We've pretty much gone over some of these things, but let me just ask you about any directives regarding your contact with the press.

F: My contact with the press was something that evolved. I think the first year I was there I had very little or no contact. Somewhere during the course of that year I may have come to know some of the members of the press on trips. I attempted to stay away from them, knowing that Liz and her own large staff very capably handled that end of things. I suppose when my appointment came known some months after I'd really been there, and there were some stories and interviews of me, at that point I came to know some of the members of the press. And they came to know me and would call and ask for information. By that time I'd been around Liz and the girls long enough that I'd heard how you handled them and how you dealt with them. There were never any instructions from Mrs. Johnson. There were never any instructions from Liz. But Liz very quickly began having me join her, or for her do the briefing sessions for the press after meetings for the Committee for a More Beautiful Capitol, in which I'd say what had happened at the meeting.

I think in a way Liz's manner of handling them was so clear and so strong, it was like Muzak in the air. You picked it up and hummed it. I think, as always happens, I developed easy communications with some members of the press. Certainly people like Wolf von Eckhardt of the Washington Post, in the very latter days Bob Cahn of the Christian Science Monitor, I could call and ask for information and ask for background and interview them, even as they had done me so many times. Of course, at times when Mrs. Johnson was working on speeches, why, she'd have a member of the press who was particularly expert in that area in and discuss with them. I think of the speech at the American Institute of Architects where she had Wolf von Eckhardt come in and have lunch with her. She helped prepare herself for that speech and what would be

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pertinent and what could be said by talking it over with him.

Now in terms of her reaction to the press, she was as anxious as everyone else in political life to see the paper in the morning. I think one of the big points of the day was rushing for that paper first thing in the morning. She'd snort over the unbecoming photograph just the way anyone else would. I particularly remember, and I think I've said this before, after making her speech at Yale, where there were a relatively small number but a noticeable number of anti-war pickets who received headline attention as much and perhaps even more than her speech, she called me when she got back and said she guessed she just couldn't go on campuses any more. Maybe it wasn't worth it to go out on trips at all if this was going to be the story. She was depressed, I felt, because she was so anxious to have the story that she generated being one of positive attitudes and positive accomplishments rather than protest. At the moment I don't think of other reactions on her part. That one naturally stands out in my mind.

Again, thanks to Liz's long working relationships as a member of the press and also her ability to assume such a role as she did at the White House, I think Mrs. Johnson had not only a good press, but she knew many members of the press quite well. She didn't go overboard in granting interviews, but on the other hand she did grant them. She would sit down with a reporter for an hour and let herself be questioned at very considerable length. Maybe her trips, which were really of the press, by the press, and for the press, are the greatest example of this, where really an amazingly large retinue and whole logistical establishment were set up. Not that there were that many traveling dignitaries with her, there may or may not have been a few in each case. But the elaborate arrangements, and they were immense and elaborate, were all to accommodate a large contingent of traveling press. There isn't anyone who doesn't like a trip, and the press loved it.

M: I think I was thinking, particularly when compared to her husband, she really had tremendous press and just a great appeal, apparently, for people. I'm sure she was generating her own personality in that. I wonder if you ever had any reaction from the West Wing because your end of things in the East Wing seemed to always have such a good reception? I wonder if any of you all offered to assist them?

F: Yes. Oh, yes. You better put that question to Liz. I think she'll have dozens of answers.

M: I think what I--

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- F: Well, I'll tell you. Mrs. Johnson dealt with the press in the formal relationship of who they were and the fact they were the fifth estate, but she didn't stop at that. She opened up and let members of the press see her mind, her behavior, her activities, how she went about being first lady. In fact often, very often the functions of being first lady were staged for the press. Now this was very different from the West Wing, I think, when one begins to compare.
- M: That was really more of an aside. I was thinking more in terms of, that certainly must have been a topic of conversation between the two ends of the White House.
- F: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.
- M: What about any changes in Mrs. Johnson from when you first became associated with her and up until the end? I'm thinking in terms of being under the pressure of being first lady, and in a period that was very volatile and often very critical of her husband.
- F: I don't know that I can see changes in her. I didn't know her before coming to the White House. I changed. I changed myself so much during that period of being there, and when you're on a moving train it's less easy to see if another train is moving. So I have no particular answer to that question. I would say this, that Mrs. Johnson had a real ability to make the most of every hour and every day. Certainly, right up to the last days at the White House she was making the most of every hour and of being there in terms of planning activities for people, social events, functions for friends and people she wanted to share the White House or the office with in many diverse ways. There was much less visible regret or disappointment over leaving on her part than on the part of most of the rest of us. She was considerably more adjusted to the wheels of history, or at least gave the impression of being so.
- M: I think you have very strongly given me the impression that Mrs. Johnson really almost put in a full work day and had that sort of attitude towards the role of first lady. And yet obviously she was enjoying it, too. It wasn't as though it was drudgery for her.
- F: Yes. Yes.
- M: I wonder if you can comment on changes brought by her in the role of first lady. This would be kind of more reflectively than on the moving train.
- F: Well, yes. I certainly can. Because each first lady, as you look back, particularly these more recent ones, Jacqueline Kennedy, Eleanor Roosevelt,

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Mamie Eisenhower, clearly express their own personality, their own preferences for how they spent their time. While that is the dominant determinant of what a first lady is, Mrs. Johnson, in addition to all her personal and social and private life and activities, clearly showed that a first lady could have a very considerable public role and didn't have to be behind the picket fence. She could come out a great deal of the time and be engaged, as women all over the country are, in activities of their community. Not only did she do this, and not only did she do it at a time of domestic strife, riots, civil turmoil and all of that, she did it successfully. She then clearly was able to galvanize so many more people because she was first lady. This is the privilege and the power that someone in the White House has enormous power of leadership and potential inspiration, and the press at one's disposal.

M: How would you compare her to other first ladies. I think you have probably in part answered that.

F: It's not fair to ask me because I'm biased. I'm not old enough to remember Eleanor Roosevelt well. I have enormous respect for her, but I think Eleanor Roosevelt was sloppy in a lot of things, sloppy in many of the social graces in which Mrs. Johnson was very elegant. I think their dimension of public concern, social concern and problem solving ability in an area carved out for themselves is very similar.

M: Did Mrs. Johnson ever express a particular desire on her part to be like another first lady or to take direction from the role that another first lady had?

F: Very definitely not, because she was being herself.

M: Was there any particular sensitivity to what Mrs. Kennedy had done in that capacity?

F: I think it's very important to say for history, as just goodness knows one person, that any comment I ever heard from Mrs. Johnson about Mrs. Kennedy was very complimentary and very praiseworthy and profoundly compassionate about what she suffered in the end. Now, in the general air of the White House, particularly more so the West Wing, there would be those moments of rivalry with the Kennedys. But this did not seem to spill over as far as Mrs. Kennedy was concerned, and of course Mrs. Johnson dedicated the garden as the Jacqueline Kennedy Garden.

M: Were you there when that happened?

F: Yes.

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M: I don't believe we have mentioned it. Do you know anything, can you shed any light on the fact that I believe that towards the last minute Mrs. Kennedy was unable to attend the dedication of the garden?

F: She did not come. I don't know why. Rose Kennedy came. No, I wasn't enough involved to know why she didn't come. I think there may have been a good reason, or one can well guess why she wouldn't want to. I notice now the garden is called the First Lady's Garden.

M: I don't think I was aware of that.

F: Yes.

H: We talked on some of the aspects of the capacity of the First Lady, and her involvement and yours, and your role in them. I have no other specific questions. I wonder if you have anything to add, just by means of concluding our remarks, your remarks.

F: No, I don't think I do. Other than to say how difficult an assignment you people have. I'm very appreciative of what you must be going through with all your interviews.

M: Sharon, if they all had such very good notes--it makes our job very easy.

F: Yes, but let me say I think anyone in public service ought to keep notes as a duty and obligation to history, because even with my notes I feel we're lucky if we're getting a 50 per cent perspective on what has transpired. Unless people have photographic minds and memories, I wince to think how little you maybe getting overall, except I'm sure you're getting the best of what everyone has.

M: Some things do stand out in people's minds.

F: Yes.

M: Thank you very much.

F: Right. Thank you.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview IV]

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