

INTERVIEW XIV

DATE: July 19, 1984
INTERVIEWEE: WALTER JENKINS
INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette
PLACE: Mr. Jenkins' office, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

G: 1955, Grace Tully joined the staff that year. Let me ask you to describe the circumstances of her joining the Senate staff.

J: Well, Grace had been an old, long-time personal friend of Mr. Johnson's and I think that he, maybe partly because of his sort of sentimental feelings towards the Roosevelt Administration, wanted Grace to join the staff, wanted somebody from the Roosevelt Administration on his staff. But she contributed. She was getting older, but she was still good and she still knew everybody, and everybody recognized her. She's a lovely lady.

G: Yes. What did she do on the staff?

J: She helped with appointments and with seeing people before he saw them and sort of a super-secretary. She really didn't do anything to do with issues at all, but she saw everybody that came in the office, she visited with them while they waited, she made appointments, she set up meetings, parties and things of that nature that she was good at.

G: How long did she stay on the staff?

J: Well, a good long time. I can't remember exactly, but it's several years.

G: Did she need a job at this time? Was it in many ways to help her, do you think?

J: That may have been involved, I don't know, but she had retirement. I think it rather was that Mr. Johnson liked her and wanted to have her around.

G: Now, in January LBJ went to Mayo's for a kidney stone ailment, went

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twice. The second time he came back with a steel brace. Do you recall that ailment?

J: Yes, I remember it very well, because we used to have to see to it that he went to the bathroom through a piece of gauze. It was because they thought that he might pass it; they wanted to catch it, the doctors did, and examine it. (Laughter) So every time he was going to go to the bathroom, we had to furnish him with a certain kind of piece of gauze that the doctors had given us. But he didn't pass it, so it got worse and got very painful.

G: How long did he wear that brace?

J: Not very long.

G: What do you remember about the brace?

J: I remember that his back hurt and I don't think he wore it but a month or something like that. It got better, got to feeling better.

G: Was this the only time that he wore that, do you know?

J: The only time I remember.

G: In March there was a big controversy of the release of the Yalta report.

I think the Democrats felt that some people in the State Department had been guilty of leaking it for political purposes. Do you recall this controversy and LBJ's attitude toward it?

J: Sure, I recall it, and I think he felt and I think Mr. Rayburn felt that the State Department had agreed not to release it, so I think they felt that it was leaked for political reasons, because it reflected badly on the Democrats.

G: Did he do anything, try to find out who had released it or--?

J: I don't remember his doing anything. Pretty hard to find out. I think he made some sort of a statement, did he not?

G: Yes. Let's see, it may even be here [in the 1955 chronology].

J: Criticizing the release.

G: Yes. Okay, now, let me ask you to talk about the heart attack in some detail. I wish you would begin by recalling if you had any hints that

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this was coming on.

J: None whatever. I noticed from reading this other people thought that he was testy and hard to get along with a day or two before. I never noticed that.

G: Really?

J: If he was with me, I didn't see it.

G: Had he complained at all about his health?

J: No. I remember him saying he was going to go to Middleburg, which he did occasionally on weekends when he didn't have any serious commitments. I've tried and I don't recall any complaint. I do recall getting a telephone call from--I'm not sure who it was--at home, saying that he was in an ambulance or a car or something on the way to the doctor. They wanted me to meet him there. I got there before he did. I've tried to recall who it was that called me, but somebody knew he was being taken from Middleburg to the hospital at Bethesda. I don't recall, maybe somebody at Bethesda, probably. But I rushed out there, I happened to be at home. I was there when he got there.

G: Let me ask you to describe the scene there in as much detail as you can.

J: Well, they took him right up into examining rooms.

G: Was he on a stretcher? Where did you first see [him]? Was he out in some sort of emergency entrance?

J: They brought him into the emergency entrance and put him on a stretcher. I don't think he was on a stretcher.

G: Was he just laying down in the back of the ambulance?

J: Yes, I think so.

G: Okay.

J: I didn't see him there.

G: When did you first see him?

J: When he was brought through on the way to [the examining room]. Mrs. Johnson and I were up on the seventeenth floor--I don't remember what floor it was, but whatever floor they were going to bring him to. They

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brought him in--he was on a stretcher--took him to an examining, private room and kept him for a while, not too long, maybe thirty or forty minutes, then brought him back to a bedroom to see Mrs. Johnson primarily, but I was there. I don't know whether they had told him he couldn't have any more cigarettes or not, but he said he wanted to have one last cigarette, and he smoked a cigarette while he talked to me. He looked very, very bad. He said they'd said he'd had a serious heart attack and that they would be coming and putting him under in just a few minutes. He did give Mrs. Johnson his money clip and told me where his will was and told me where he had a little extra money in his desk. I really felt that he did not think he would live through the night.

G: Really?

J: He was preparing himself for not ever being there anymore.

G: Did he say anything to that effect, or was it simply the--?

J: No, but he said about what he wanted, he wanted me to help administer his will, he wanted me to be sure everybody got taken care of. I mean it was the type of conversation that you'd think he wasn't going to be there anymore.

G: Was he relaxed? Was he in pain?

J: I think he was in pain, I don't know, although they had given him something to calm him down, and he was lucid enough. But he had limited time because he could only talk to us for like ten minutes or so, I've forgotten what it was.

G: Yes, and then they gave him something that--?

J: --to put him out, took him away.

Mrs. Johnson moved to the hospital and answered the mail from there. We operated the office from there. Of course, I guess you couldn't do that anywhere but Bethesda.

G: Yes. Well, let me ask you to go back and describe what her reactions were during this conversation you just [recounted].

J: Well, as always she was rather calm and collected. She didn't break

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down or cry or carry on or anything of that nature, as some women do. It's not her nature to do a thing like that. She just said, "Honey, everything will be all right."

G: Was she positive about it? Did she think that--?

J: I don't know what she thought, but she tried to act like she was.

G: Was she? Was she comforting to him?

J: Yes.

G: Anything else about that that you remember right there? Did the doctors come in and say, "This is what his chances are," or anything like that?

J: The doctors came in and talked to her, not in his presence. There was no one in the room when he was with us. But they came in immediately after he was taken away and talked to her. I don't know for sure what they told her. She could tell you that better. But I believe they told her that he'd had a serious heart attack and his chances were fairly good, but couldn't tell. I remember they told her--it's coming back a little now--that the first twenty-four hours were very critical; if he got past the first twenty-four hours his chances increased, I don't remember.

G: Dramatically.

J: Dramatically. Then the next critical period, I believe, was forty-eight more hours. If he got through that, then he probably would live all right, get over it. But there were two periods that were very critical. I remember that now, I had forgotten.

G: What did he want you to do with the money that he kept in his desk?

J: Oh, he just wanted to be sure that I got it and used it, gave it to his family and to the children, and to Mrs. Johnson, rather than to have somebody find it later on, maybe misappropriate it or something.

G: Did he keep it in a hidden compartment in his desk?

J: Yes.

G: Is that right? I'll be darned.

J: It wasn't a lot, but it was, you know, I've forgotten, a couple of

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thousand dollars or something like that.

G: Where was it in the desk?

J: Well, his desk had a deal like this right here.

G: This?

J: No, down here on the side.

G: Oh, I see.

J: But it doesn't open unless you know the combination.

G: I see, okay. So it was just kind of a safe.

J: Yes.

G: Well, what comes next with the heart attack? Were you out there the next day? Did you go back the next day?

J: Yes, and nearly every day, taking stuff out there and back to the [office].

G: Let me ask you to recall what you remember about the next day, the first full day in the hospital.

J: He was not allowed to have any visitors, and we didn't start operating the office there the next day. I think it was a week later or some thing when it was clear that he was going to be all right.

G: Did you organize the office in his absence? I mean, was there someone there to take calls and report on his condition?

J: At the hospital?

G: No, in the Senate office.

J: Oh, yes.

G: How did you set up the communications from one to the other?

J: Well, we had Mrs. Johnson and who? Mary Rather? I don't remember who [but] somebody at the hospital who reported to the Senate office just hourly as to what we could say and what we couldn't say.

G: I see.

J: The doctors, I think, as I remember, there was twice a day that they gave them something at the hospital that we could say.

G: The doctors would do that?

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J: Yes.

G: What was his mood shortly, say the first day or so after?

J: I don't know. They didn't allow any company for, I don't remember, two, three, or four days. By the time they did, his mood was pretty good.

G: Was it? Okay. Now, heart patients also feel, I guess, a despondency.

J: He did, fully, at periods. They told us he would, and he did. Of course I think he, more than just the average patient, felt this. If he had any chance to be president or vice president or something, that this had ended it. I think he felt that, and he became quite despondent at times during the next two or three weeks when he wouldn't talk to anybody very much.

G: This was right after, I guess, the *Orlando Sentinel* and some other newspapers had been touting him for president.

J: They'd begun booming him for the president just when this happened.

I'm drawing on my own thoughts as to why he got so despondent sometimes, although the doctor told us he would, that all heart patients do, people who have had a serious heart attack. But I think his was worse than normal, because he certainly got despondent.

G: How was this manifest? Was he just real morose, or was he--?

J: Just wouldn't talk, he just wouldn't have anything to do--right at first he was all right, but then he'd have these periods. They gave him some sort of despondency medicine; I don't know what it was. And he'd be all right then for a while, and then he'd have another period of despondency.

G: Did you do anything during these periods to cheer him up?

J: I tried to, or we did. We tried to tell him everything that happened at the office, all the good news, all the wires and letters and so on. I don't remember that there was any bad news, but we didn't tell him any bad news. We just--

G: Did you ever fear that he was so despondent that he might commit suicide or anything like that?

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J: No, I don't think I ever had that thought, because that was not his style. But I did fear that he would kind of give up, maybe wouldn't really make the effort to [recover]. I never really thought he would commit suicide, but I thought maybe he would just say, "This is it. I've had it."

G: It seems like Sam Houston [Johnson] recalled this same mood and that the staff would help encourage some press stories to the effect that his career was not over, that he could still run for the presidency, or something like that. Do you recall any of this effort to--?

J: I recall the effort to cheer him up, I don't recall that. That would have been more George Reedy's department probably.

G: Yes. Were there any pending matters that had to be taken care of that he couldn't handle that you had a problem with?

J: I don't recall what, but I know that Senator [Earle] Clements, who was thrown into the position of majority leader, had some serious problems. I remember him calling and saying, "Well, what are we going to do about this? What are we going to do about that?" and so on. And he wanted to talk to President Johnson, but the doctor said no for a while, so he just had to tough it out. I don't recall what the issues were, but there were some. And Senator Clements had not really been-- well, he'd been leader, but Mr. Johnson sort of handled anything serious himself, so Senator Clements was sort of thrown in the front lines not quite ready.

G: Well, the [natural] gas bill came up at one point, didn't it, during this time when LBJ was out of commission?

J: Well--

G: Perhaps this was after he'd already--

J: He was there when the gas bill came up, and maybe it came up but they got it postponed or something, because he participated in the gas bill.

G: In 1955, did he this year? I know he did in 1956, but I'm--

J: Did it come up in 1955?

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G: Yes, I think it did.

J: Well, I don't remember. I know when it came up seriously and they had the big fight over it, he was back in harness and led the fight.

G: Okay. Let me ask you about Mrs. Johnson's [office] operation in the hospital. You talked a little bit about her setting up a desk there, or at least sitting there. Let me ask you to go into some detail on that.

J: Well, we did most of the letters at the office. She wrote some in longhand to people that were very close, but she would sort of-- anything that had to do with the heart attack went there, and she saw it and showed him what she felt like she ought to show him. Then she answered some of them herself, from the people he knew closely. But a lot of them came back to the office. I think she did set up one typewriter down there; in fact, I know she did.

G: How much time did you spend down there after he could have visitors?

J: I don't recall spending a lot of time. I'd go and play dominoes with him sometimes at night, but he had a very limited supply of visitors for a while when visitors started happening, and I didn't feel that I was somebody that needed to take up that slack.

G: Dr. [James] Cain in one of his press briefings said that LBJ was eating well but was being denied access to the telephone and not allowed to smoke and that this was causing a problem for the doctors and nurses.

J: Yes, I don't remember at the hospital, but the rest of his life, until he started smoking again not long before he died, he would take a cigarette and lick it or hold it in his mouth. It was so obvious that he really missed cigarettes, but he, as far as I know, did not have one at all. I'm pretty sure he did not until he started smoking not long before he died.

G: What about the telephone? He was not allowed to have a telephone in his room, or at least to use it?

J: Well, because they felt that he had telephonitis and that he would use it all the time.

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G: Did he resist that?

J: Yes, I don't know how bitterly, but he wanted to use it on occasion.

G: What about a radio?

J: I think he had a radio, I believe he did. I'm pretty sure he had a radio; he could listen to the news and--

G: Now, let me ask you about the visitors who came. I've got some sort of list.

J: When he could have visitors, he had everybody prominent that came to see him, from the President down.

G: Do you recall any of these visits as being significant or memorable? I have Senators Russell, Daniel, Clements, Symington, Smathers, Pastore, Kerr, Knowland, Malone and Tom Clark, Don Cook, George Brown, Arthur Krock, Secretary Hobby and Secretary Anderson, Bill Kittrell, John Connally--

J: Not really, because, as I remember, the doctors told them not to bring up any business.

G: Oh, really?

J: At first, when they first had [visits], and not to let him get into business. If he brought up business, they were to turn the subject to something else.

G: Yes. Did you have the same orders?

J: Yes.

G: Well, who decided what to do in his absence, who made the decisions?

J: Well, as far as the office was concerned, pretty much I did. But as far as the majority leadership, Senator Clements and Bobby Baker.

G: Well, surely LBJ would ask you what about this, what about that.

J: He started doing that. He really didn't--they had pretty well told him he was not to. He didn't at first. But he began to.

G: What were your responses in this case?

J: Well, everything's all right, there are no problems, everything's going along smoothly.

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- G: His mother came up for that. Do you recall?
- J: Yes, I remember when she came. I didn't know until I read this that it was her first flight. I don't think I knew that at the time. I don't remember it. But I remember when she came.
- G: Anything significant or memorable there about her? What did she do?
- J: Well, she was allowed to visit him clearly more than anyone else unless it was Mrs. Johnson, Lady Bird. And I think she helped him, cheered him.
- G: Now, you mentioned that he stopped smoking, of course. Did he change his diet also as a result of the heart attack?
- J: Oh, yes, he certainly did. Mrs. Johnson, I don't know whether she had to or not, but she weighed everything she gave him, no salt, no sugar, and he lost I've forgotten how much, but he lost a substantial amount of weight. He became very calorie conscious, which he had not been before, not ever. I don't think he ever knew [before] how much calories there was in anything, but he could tell you to the one how many calories were in everything [after his heart attack]. He ate an awful lot of cantaloupes because he could mess there with the best bulk or the bulk with the least amount of calories. He became a cantaloupe nut.
- G: Did his attitude toward life or his philosophy or anything change as a result of this close call?
- J: This is only my opinion, but I felt that he became more--I don't know just how to put it--less hard to get along with.
- G: Really?
- J: I don't mean for me, I'm just talking about--
- G: In general?
- J: In general.
- G: Why do you say that?
- J: Well, up to that time when things didn't go just to suit him, he had a tendency to fly off the handle, at little things, never on big, serious things, but little annoying things. It seemed to me that he was able to

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ignore those things more after the heart attack.

G: Did he slow down his pace?

J: Oh, he did substantially for six months, but he picked it back up.

G: Was he ever back to the pre-heart attack [pace]?

J: Yes.

G: Was he? Any other differences that you noticed?

J: No. I don't know when he decided that he still had a possibility of continued real strong leadership of the country, because there was a period in there that he did not feel that he was going to be able to reassume leadership. I don't know when. I guess that fall when he was at the Ranch.

G: Well, now, Dr. Cain made an announcement that he could resume his normal activity in January, I think, but that he would have to cut back to a forty-eight-hour week instead of a seventy-two-hour week. I wonder if you can shed some more light on his actual decision that he was physically up to continuing first as a senator and secondly as majority leader.

J: I don't know when he reached those conclusions, but he did take it easy for a while when he came back, but gradually he came back to a seventy-two-hour week. He didn't stick with a forty-eight-hour week. I can't tell you when because I can't remember, but just little by little he forgot about the heart attack. I'm sure he didn't forget about it, but he got to where he ignored it.

G: Yes. Now, I guess he spent close to a month in the hospital and then moved out to his house and recuperated there for a while before flying to Texas. Let me ask you to describe the situation out at his house. Surely you must have been out there.

J: Oh, yes. He had reached the point, though, where he could have a pretty unlimited number of visitors when he wanted to. We tried to police it where he didn't have too many. He had begun to know and follow what was going on by the time he got out to his house, tell us what to do.

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- G: Did he set up an office out there, or did he work out of one part of the house in particular?
- J: I don't recall his setting up an office. He worked on the telephone. He may have, but I don't think so.
- G: Would he tend to go to bed early and rest quite a bit, or did--?
- J: Yes.
- G: When would you play dominoes out at the house?
- J: I don't think I ever played at the house. Oh, I have, you understand, I've played at the house a lot of times but before that. I played at the hospital. He had kind of gotten over that little spell of [playing dominoes]. There was a time when he was a congressman that we played dominoes a lot, Homer Thornberry, Jake Pickle and different people. He'd gotten sort of over that. But then when he was in the hospital, he didn't have anything to do, why, he began playing dominoes again.
- G: Did he read or learn about heart attacks and did he attempt to understand his own situation more medically?
- J: Yes. I don't know what he read, but I know he asked a lot of questions of Dr.--what was the name of the doctor from Georgia?
- G: Willis Hurst.
- J: Willis Hurst. Willis Hurst practically became a full-time Johnson--we all became very fond of Willis Hurst. He was at the house a lot. Well, he was at the house a lot from then on.
- G: Let me ask you to go into his relationship with his doctors here in the heart attack. He had Hurst there to treat him and Jim Cain also came down and spent some time there. Now, what was Cain's role I wonder?
- J: Just an old-time personal friend who tried to sort of generally advise him. I don't think Cain ever tried to handle the situation medically. Dr. Hurst was the medical doctor.
- G: He was the cardiologist.
- J: Heart specialist from the college in Georgia--what's the name of it?
- G: Emory [University].

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J: Emory. [He] was in the navy at the time, was at Bethesda. Mr. Johnson did not know Hurst until he had his heart attack and just happened to get him, but he became very fond of him.

G: Now, you were to stay in Washington, is that right, when he [returned to Texas]?

J: I did stay in Washington. I don't remember. I came to Austin for a while to see that the office ran, but--

G: He flew to Texas and then spent most of the summer and fall [there].

J: Most of the fall.

G: Anything else that you remember about his recovery either in Texas or [Washington]? Did he change his style at the Ranch?

J: He really followed the doctor's instructions and took it easy. He just didn't do much.

G: He built that swimming pool, I guess.

J: And spent a lot of time in it.

G: Anything in particular about the building of the pool or his use of it that's significant, interesting?

J: I remember the building of it. I've forgotten who it was that built it, but they felt like he oversupervised them.

G: It was a Dallas firm, wasn't it?

J: I don't remember. I'm trying to think. I don't remember. But they felt like he was right there and criticized and changed.

G: Did that surprise you?

J: No. It surprised them, but--

G: I have a note here that says that he had a quiet birthday celebration. You know, he arrived in Fredericksburg I think a day or so before his birthday. And he had a very small and private birthday party with Mr. and Mrs. A. W. Moursund and the Melvin Winters and the Thornberrys. Why would those three couples be there?

J: Because he liked them. They didn't have any political significance at all, and they didn't--well, of course, Homer Thornberry did, he was his

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congressman, replaced him. But they talked about hunting and he just enjoyed them.

G: Well, say, Melvin Winters, what was Melvin Winters to Lyndon Johnson? Was he basically just a ranching friend?

J: Just a ranching friend. He liked Melvin Winters very much, and Mrs. Winters.

G: And Moursund, what was his--?

J: Well, Moursund was more his partner. Moursund sort of saw to it that the Ranch kept running, and he had several ranches of his own. They later had difficulties because, with all due regard to A. W.--he's a very able man--he's not easy to get along with.

G: And the Thornberrys, of course, he had known Homer Thornberry for a long time I'm sure.

J: He'd known Homer Thornberry for years. Homer and his wife and my wife and I and Mr. and Mrs. Johnson used to play canasta every Saturday night. I can't remember when that was. Every Saturday night, you know, it was definite. I was captain of one team and Mr. Johnson was captain of another. I was eight hundred dollars ahead of him, I remember that, and he said, "Will you take us to White Sulphur Springs this weekend?" When was that?

G: Was it in the forties?

J: I don't remember, but I said yes, so I was the host at White Sulphur Springs. It was his money, but I had won it at canasta. The others weren't betting, the Thornberrys weren't betting, and I took my winnings and--I can't remember when that was. It was when my wife was pregnant with the twins, so it would have been thirty-two years ago.

G: Thirty-two years ago?

J: We played canasta. He was never a card player much, but he got on a canasta binge for a while.

G: Yes. Then it would be about 1951 or 1952, somewhere in there.

J: I remember it was July 4, whatever year it was, that we went to White

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Sulphur Springs.

G: Did he start walking for exercise after his heart attack?

J: He certainly did, to the point that everybody around him nearly went nuts walking down to Cousin Oreole's [Bailey]. His regular walking routine every night was from the Ranch house to Cousin Oreole's, which is, oh, I guess what, half a mile? He'd make everybody that was there walk down to Cousin Oreole's with him, and those walks were not as popular with some people as they were with him.

G: Why not?

J: Oh, because some people didn't like to walk as much as he had decided he did, but every night he'd go down and walk to Cousin Oreole's.

G: What did he talk about when he--?

J: Oh, he loved to talk to Cousin Oreole about old times and kid her about her boyfriends, which she didn't have, just tease her.

G: She was very hard of hearing.

J: That's right. He'd have to shout at her, but she got right back, she came right back; she never took anything off of him. She was really a fine old lady.

G: Anything else on his recovery that you recall that's significant, his recuperation?

J: I don't think so. He had his ups and downs.

G: Now, Eisenhower had a heart attack that fall, a serious one. Do you recall LBJ's reaction to this?

J: Well, I think it made him a little closer to Eisenhower. They felt they had something in common.

G: Do you think it made LBJ feel that his own political future had more prospect if the sitting president had a heart attack and could continue on?

J: It may have, I don't know. I don't think I ever heard him express it one way or another.

G: Okay.

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End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview XIV

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- (3) During my lifetime, I retain all copyright in the material given to the United States by the terms of this instrument. Thereafter, the copyright in the transcripts and the tape recordings shall pass to the United States Government. During my lifetime, researchers may publish brief "fair use" quotations of the transcripts and tape recordings without my express consent in each case.
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Donor

Beth Jenkins

2-5-87

Date

Archivist of the United States

Francis S. Burt

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Date