

INTERVIEWEE: PERLE MESTA

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

October 4, 1971

F: This is an interview with Mrs. Perle Mesta in her apartment in the Sheraton-Park Hotel in Washington, D.C. on October 4, 1971. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

Mrs. Mesta, just to get the interview started, you are an Oklahoma girl, I believe?

M: Yes, that's right.

F: When did you come east?

M: When I was sixteen years old. I've lived here for years and years.

F: How did you happen to come that early?

M: Well, many reasons. Because in the first place [telephone] I had friends here, I used to know the Gores very well. I used to visit the Gores. I came here and then married in New York and we had an apartment here. We lived in Pittsburgh but we always had an apartment here in the old Willard Hotel.

F: When did you begin to have some idea that someone named Lyndon Johnson was in the world?

M: In my book--did you read my book?

F: Yes.

M: I said he was going to be President. Oh, I knew Lyndon and Mrs. Johnson--as I said before, Sam Rayburn introduced me to them years ago.

F: Did you see much of them before he became Senator, or did most of your friendship develop afterwards?

M: No, I saw them right through the years.

F: Did you ever have any opportunity to observe his relationship with President Truman?

M: I'm sure I must have because he was a friend of Mr. Truman and I was very close to Truman.

F: Now, he became a senator the same time that you became the envoy to Luxembourg. Did he ever visit you while you were over there?

M: No.

F: In 1959 when Premier Khrushchev came to this country he visited the Mesta plant. Were you along on that visit.

M: I wasn't along on that visit but I was with him twice afterwards. In the first place, I was at the dinner at the White House that had been given for him. Then I was with him at a party at the Russian Embassy and we talked about the plant. He said he would like to buy some machinery from me. I said, "I am not a saleswoman. I am not selling any."

F: Was he an easy man to visit with--Khrushchev?

M: Yes.

F: Very friendly visits--the two visits you had with him?

M: Yes.

F: Did he tend toward a woman to be sort of courtly, or all business, or what was he like?

M: You see, I was in Russia. I was there three months, traveled 1,200 miles in Russia. Of course, they all knew I was there. He was gruff.

F: Even to you he was gruff?

M: Yes.

F: Was he sort of pompous? Did he act --?

M: He didn't with me because I wouldn't let him.

F: I see. In other words you met him head on. Did you have any part in the decision of trying to get Johnson to run for the presidency in 1960?

M: I don't know. I certainly wanted it.

F: Did you ever talk to him personally about it?

M: Yes.

F: What was his attitude?

M: I was very, very anxious for him to run.

F: He seemed to have held back in announcing.

M: Yes. He always did that. He always did that.

F: Why do you think he did it?

M: Nature, that was his nature.

F: Just sort of reluctant to stick his neck out?

M: Reluctant to give word to the public what was in his mind.

F: You were at Los Angeles at the 1960 convention, weren't you?

M: I certainly was.

F: Did you think he had any chance of getting the nomination?

M: I certainly did.

F: What were you doing at the convention?

M: Working.

F: What kind of work?

M: Delegates.

F: Just talking to people.

M: All the time. I gave one of the biggest parties I ever gave in my life there.

F: Where was this?

M: At the Ambassador Hotel--7,000 people for breakfast.

F: That's a lot of breakfast. How did you handle that? What did you do, take all the hotel rooms, all the dining facilities?

M: Yes. Trying to put him over.

F: Did you feel you were gaining ground?

M: I thought I would, or I wouldn't have ever done such a thing. I had all the delegates, and he was chairman of his delegation. Kennedy, you know, was running and he wasn't a delegate, so he didn't come.

F: I see. You had a slight advantage there then, didn't you? Did he make a speech?

M: Who?

F: Johnson.

M: Of course he did. So did Sam Rayburn.

F: Did you find him a good man to work with at that time?

M: Yes, always. I always find Johnson all right. He had a temper, but he was very forgiving, and very lovable, a very lovable man.

F: Did you play a role in his acceptance of the vice presidency?

M: No, I did not.

F: I sort of picked up from one senator that perhaps you were working behind the scenes.

M: For him to be vice president? No, for him to be President. I never wanted him to be vice president. I thought he was due to be Number One man, not number two man.

F: Did you have any idea that he would accept the vice presidency? Or would be offered it?

M: No, no. I was very disappointed when he did.

F: Is that the main reason that you supported Nixon in 1960?

M: Yes, absolutely, absolutely. He knew I was going to support Nixon. So did Sam Rayburn know it.

F: Did that ever make any difference in your personal relationship?

M: Never did. Not a bit.

F: He understood your reasons? What did you do after the nomination of Kennedy? Did you leave the convention, or did you stay around?

M: I left.

F: You weren't there then for the nomination of Johnson as Vice President?

M: No.

Oh, I didn't leave the convention. But I left the building that night--in tears.

F: Were a lot of people in tears with you?

M: Yes.

F: What did you do the rest of the night? Did you just go on back to the hotel?

M: No, he had a cottage and I went over to the cottage.

F: What was the atmosphere like over there?

M: Sad, sad, very sad. I remember Mrs. Roosevelt was there and I remember how she sat up in the gallery and she moved from one place to the other and the press would follow her. That was marvelous. Of course, she was for Johnson too, you know.

F: Did you ever talk to her about this?

M: Yes, of course.

F: She was pretty open about how she felt? Did she ever talk to you about Lyndon Johnson?

M: She must have because she visited me five days when I was over in Luxembourg. So we must have talked about him.

F: You never heard her express her husband's sentiments toward Lyndon Johnson? Johnson and President Roosevelt had early a sort of mutual admiration. Did you ever hear President Truman express himself for Lyndon Johnson?

M: I can't remember.

F: What about President Eisenhower? You've known them all. It really has been remarkable.

M: Eisenhower liked Johnson very much--I remember that very much.

F: What prompted your decision to sell your home to Johnson after he became Vice President?

M: There were two acres there and that was a great deal of responsibility. Johnson had a little house over here. He needed it badly, and I got a hold

of him and told him how he needed it and sold it to him. He needed it for his girls. He needed it for himself, and he should have had a house like that.

F: Of course, the Vice President has no official residence.

M: They should have bought that house. That house belonged to the Vice President. I was always sorry that I didn't make it so it would go to the Vice President.

F: Did you sell it to the Vice President--Johnson--directly or did Phil Graham or someone sort of handle it?

M: I have no comment on that.

F: Okay. Did you go back and visit there after you sold it?

M: Oh I was there many times.

F: Did you ever throw any parties for the Vice President while he was Vice President?

M: Sure.

F: For any political purpose or just for friends?

M: Everything I do is for a political purpose. I never do a thing that hasn't got a political tint.

F: You weren't giving up then at this time on Johnson as a future President?

M: No, no.

F: How do you think he enjoyed being Vice President?

M: I don't think he liked it one single bit, as far as I could tell.

F: In what way?

M: For a man with his stature, a man who has been one of the greatest majority leaders we've ever had--who would like to be subservient to a young man 49 years old? I wouldn't.

F: But you never doubted for a minute that he was loyal to Kennedy?

M: Always loyal. He was loyal to his friends.

F: Did you think that he and John Kennedy were friends?

M: Yes.

F: After a fashion, huh?

M: I didn't say that. You said it.

F: All right, I'll take that. When Johnson became President, where were you--
at the time of the assassination?

M: In Puerto Rico.

F: How did you happen to hear about it?

M: That was a very peculiar thing. I was down there and I was writing for McCall's magazine. And I had a group with me, the president of McCall's, the editor of McCall's--not the present editor of McCall's--and we were going in mayor's house. As we went in, they said, "Kennedy has been shot!" And I took a terrific cold, and we went right back, we went right back and--

F: I went to a party at her house once--was it still up there on that top floor?

M: Whose house?

F: The mayoress of San Juan.

M: Yes. Anyhow, the Spanish ambassador, I believe it was, was with me and of course we had to fly right home. I flew right to New York and I went to bed. I was there the whole time because I had a terrible cold.

F: Were you in contact at all with either of the Johnsons?

M: No.

F: When did you first see them after that?

M: I can't remember, at all. I saw them many times because they lived in this house that I sold them for, I think, two months and let Jacqueline Kennedy

live in the White House for those two months--before they moved into the White House.

F: Did they ever talk to you about how to use the Elms so as to make it a more serviceable residence?

M: Make it more serviceable?

F: I thought, with your prior experience, you might have been able to advise them on--

M: It was very serviceable, you know, you could give all the parties you wanted--40 or 50 for dinner. I'd had 60 for dinner there.

F: Did you ever throw any more parties out there, or were they all here after you moved in here?

M: I lived in another apartment for awhile, and they were there. I lived at 3900 for awhile.

F: When did you move in here, incidentally?

M: About five years ago. I lost my sister who lived with me.

F: Did the President or Mrs. Johnson ever suggest that you have a party for them, or did you always suggest it?

M: Oh they never--No President ever suggests that. That's out of the question.

F: He wouldn't be caught in a position of asking? When you wanted to throw a party--what's protocol in this? Do you contact the President and say, "What days are you open?"

M: No, you ask them if they will allow you to give a party. They're not supposed to go to private parties.

F: And Johnson was very strict in observing that.

M: Truman was the one that always came to me, always.

F: Now then, when President Johnson came to your parties, were they sort of off-the-record?

- M: Oh, heavens yes! I didn't say he came to my parties. I never say anything like that.
- F: When you went to White House parties, did you go to some of those small parties, or did you go to the big state dinners, or were they all mixed up?
- M: I went to both.
- F: Have you been to White House parties under what Presidents?
- M: Hoover. Who was after Hoover?
- F: Roosevelt.
- M: Roosevelt.
- F: Then Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy--
- M: Truman, Eisenhower, and Johnson.
- F: Did you ever go under Kennedy?
- M: No.
- F: You were out with that.
- M: Out.
- F: Have you been with Nixon?
- M: Oh yes.
- F: Is there a lot of difference in the atmosphere? I'm thinking of the state dinners.
- M: There's a difference in every President's dinner. They have a pattern of their own.
- F: Do you feel, even in a big formal gathering like that, the impress of the particular President's personality?
- M: Yes, and the First Lady.

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F: Now, it has been my impression--rightly or wrongly, and I'd like you to comment on this--that the Johnsons seemed to throw a more relaxed party in a way, that people visited in a more relaxed congenial manner. That's not necessarily true.

M: They had more of a Texas atmosphere, as far as that's concerned. Eisenhower was very relaxed; Mrs. Eisenhower was very relaxed. Of course, Truman couldn't be more relaxed. But Johnson, the Texans--are you a Texan?

F: Yes.

M: I don't need to tell you. You know, "Hell, how are you!"

F: Kind of an everybody glad to see everybody else. Were they noisy?

M: A little noisy, yes--not all of them, but any matter of means--but a lot of them were very noisy. You got that in the White House.

F: As far as general food and service is concerned, are they all about the same level?

M: No. Johnson had a lot of barbecue stuff.

F: Even at the White House?

M: They had very good food, very good food.

F: Is it quieter now that Mr. Nixon is in?

M: Oh yes.

F: What's the difference--Mr. Nixon himself being a somewhat quieter person?

M: They are all quieter. There has never been anybody as noisy as the Texans were.

F: I see. At the 1960 inauguration, you were rather active in that time, as I recall--

M: What was it?

F: The inauguration here when Kennedy was inaugurated in 1960. Despite the

fact that you had supported Nixon, you went ahead and made plans for an inaugural party.

M: I was away.

F: You were away?

M: I was in California.

F: So you skipped that completely?

M: It was snowing and it was very bad weather so I stayed there.

F: You headed Democratic Women for Nixon in 1960, as I recall--or were active in it.

M: Yes.

F: Just what did you do?

M: What anyone would do that was campaigning.

F: Telephoned and buttonholed?

M: Anything that anybody would do.

F: Were you active in raising funds?

M: No.

F: Did you find that you had much of a fight against the Kennedy image?

M: That has always been a factor, a great factor, and still they have a great image, regardless of all that, they have an image. They are really a remarkable family as far as that's concerned.

F: It's real.

M: Remarkable family. Some things I approve, some things I don't approve of. I think Mrs. Kennedy is a very wonderful woman.

F: Mrs. Kennedy.

M: Mrs. Kennedy.

F: You're talking about Rose.

M: Rose Kennedy, yes. The way she's gone through everything. Maybe she's

the stamina. Maybe she's the one that's held everything the way it's held.

F: Did you get any opportunity to notice whether Jacqueline Kennedy slighted Lady Bird Johnson?

M: I've known Jacqueline Kennedy since she was eleven years old. You see, I go to Newport in the summer, and I've seen her around--her mother and her stepfather. I don't know how she could have slighted them when they let her stay in the White House--it had never been known before--for about three months and had the school for her children in the White House. The Johnsons did everything possible to make everything very congenial and a very happy relationship with them. Now why Mrs. Kennedy wouldn't come back to the Rose Garden when it was dedicated to her and named after her, why she wouldn't come back for those things, I think was probably a good thing that she didn't. But however she didn't, and I don't understand it. I don't understand why she didn't come back for the opening of the Kennedy Center. A lot of people say that Teddy Kennedy had caused so much trouble with--

F: Chappaquiddick?

M: You know, the Greek wanted to borrow some money and Teddy got up and spoke against it. You know that?

F: Yes.

M: Well, a lot of people think that that's the reason she wouldn't come back, that he wouldn't let her come back for that reason.

F: I see.

M: You know that, don't you?

F: A little family feud.

M: A little feud there. That's what a lot of people say. I don't know

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anything about it. But that's the reason a lot of people think she didn't come back. I don't know why she didn't come back, but she didn't come back. Maybe there was a feeling there, you know--sadness, that she didn't come back. It's not for me to say, but she didn't come back! I can say that.

F: If Mrs. Johnson, though, ever felt any slight she's not one to share her problems, is she?

M: You'll never know it.

F: Did you happen to be at the White House that day that Eartha Kitt was there?

M: No.

F: Were you ever there when anything like that happened that got out of hand?

M: No, thank goodness, no.

F: You're glad to have been spared that.

M: I'm glad I wasn't there.

F: In 1964 you were sort of unofficial hostess at the Democratic national convention.

M: I should say I was.

F: Tell me all about it.

M: It was going to be a very stupid convention. It was going to be a convention that was going to try to put Kennedy in again--

F: Well, they were pushing Robert Kennedy.

M: Robert Kennedy, that's what it was. So I rented a house, and I gave a dinner every night for seven nights. Then I had a bus that would take them from my house to the convention so they would get there on time. I entertained about 200 at dinner every night. Anybody could come, any of the delegates could come--a beautiful house.

F: Did you issue invitations?

M: No.

F: Just kind of a free will--

M: The delegates could come, the delegates. Then at the last, when it was all over, I gave a big, big party at the hotel. There were about 7,000--no, about 8,000 people.

F: Now, in the beginning it looked as if the convention were going to be a cut-and-dried affair and hard to get any great interest in it. Did you have a feeling that the interest then built up that it did get to be a kind of good convention?

M: Yes, it was.

F: So you felt that your efforts there then were worthwhile?

M: Yes.

F: Did the President ever say anything to you about it?

M: No.

F: Did he ever thank you?

M: No.

F: He just left you on your own there?

M: He knew it.

F: He was aware of it?

M: He was aware of it.

F: Did he ever offer you any positions, honorary or otherwise, during the administration?

M: No.

F: Did you ever want any?

M: I don't want a thing, not a thing in the world. I was in Luxembourg five years, and I don't want to go to another foreign country. I don't want

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anything. I want to be on my own and do what I please--and vote for whom I please. If the Democrats put up somebody I don't like, I'll vote Republican. If the Republicans put up somebody I don't like, I'll vote--I am a Democrat. I'm registered as a Democrat.

F: When the inaugural of Johnson came on in 1965, were you involved in that?

M: Oh yes.

F: What was your--

M: I did everything I could. What was I! I was protocol--

F: Yes, I know you did issue a statement describing proper attire.

M: Yes. And I gave a big party and I went to the Armory because I thought that was going to be the most less attractive and I tried to be at the things that would be the least attractive so that other people could go to the attractive things.

F: Did the President come to your party?

M: Yes, he came to it. He went to all of them.

F: What did you do to spruce up the Armory? Because it is a raw old building.

M: Well, they did the decorations.

F: Did it look nice? It still looked like an armory.

M: I did do something to the Armory when Truman was elected. I was chairman of that ball, then I did a great deal to the Armory. It really looked wonderful. I spent a great deal of money on it for Truman.

F: When you give a party on something like that, does the general inaugural committee make all the arrangements?

M: They don't have a thing to do with it.

F: This is your party.

M: I'm a lone wolf worker.

F: I see. And you decided what who would play, what they'd eat and drink and

so forth. Do you clear that sort of thing with the White House and tell them this is what "I want to do"?

M: Never.

F: This is strictly Perle Mesta's party, all the way.

M: They know it. Anybody who asks me to be chairman, they know it.

F: And they know it well enough to stay out of the way.

M: Yes.

F: You gave a party later that year for Senator Mansfield. I don't know whether you recall this or not, and it conflicted with one that had been given for Ted Kennedy--

M: It did not conflict at all.

F: I was going to ask you, is this press talk?

M: That's press talk. I had this party engaged long before I knew anything about Teddy Kennedy. Teddy Kennedy's was a dance at 11:00. My party was 8:00 o'clock--a dinner. Anybody that wanted to go to the dance could go to the dance, but they also danced at my party. Most all of my people that came to my dinner stayed and danced at my house, and some of them went over to the Kennedys. No opposition, there was no feeling--there was nothing about this, nothing. The dinner party was at 8:00 o'clock and at 11:00 o'clock people are generally ready to go home. They had their dance at 11:00 o'clock.

F: So if you wanted to make two parties, you could.

M: You could, sure. That was all press.

F: Did you ever get any feeling that the Johnsons were undercut by the sort of leftover Kennedy people after 1964? That there was a wing of the Democratic party that was dedicated--?

M: Well, you know and I know that there are two factions here of the Democrats.

There's a Kennedy faction and a Johnson, and there has always been.

F: And they continued to be?

M: Yes. There's always been a Kennedy faction and a Johnson. Johnson did not want it. He told us not to talk about them. He did not want it. And when he became President he didn't want it.

F: Johnson never encouraged this sort of thing.

M: Never, he did not want it. And I think that's one reason he didn't run again because he didn't want to split the Democratic party. He knew that Bobby was getting ready to run, so I think Johnson stepped out.

F: Rather than take on a fight with the party.

M: Yes.

F: Were you aware that he was going to step out, or was it as much a surprise to you as it was to most people?

M: No. He had that in his pocket, you know, for a long time.

F: Were you watching on TV that night?

M: I think I was, I'm not sure. I was shocked. But I know I saw Lynda the next day and she told me just what I'm telling you. He didn't want to split the party.

F: Did you take any active part in helping with either of the weddings of the two girls?

M: I went to them, but I didn't take an active part.

F: As a hostess, what did you think of the weddings?

M: I thought they were perfectly beautiful--both of them--and handled just exquisitely, couldn't have been better.

F: You wouldn't agree with Women's Wear Daily that it was "Texas Tacky"--I think is what they called it?

M: Oh no.

F: What is that, just a certain journalistic fight?

M: I don't know what it is, but it's not true. They couldn't have been lovelier.

F: The guests were nice, and on their good behavior?

M: Oh sure. Didn't yell and scream at all!

F: Good. From what you could see did President Johnson always relate well with foreign dignitaries who came here?

M: I guess so. I wasn't in the room with him, and I wasn't with him, but I would think so.

F: Well, at dinners you would have gotten some feeling of whether they were stiff or whether the two gentlemen seemed--

M: Oh no. Johnson could be very charming, you know, very lovable, and very quiet when he wanted to be.

F: A good listener at times.

M: Very. I think he's a great person myself. I adore him. I didn't always agree with him. I've had some fights with him, but we always made up and kissed. I think he's a very lovable person myself.

F: Were your fights over different viewpoints--

M: Oh I don't know what it would be about. I can't tell you what it would be, something you know--he'd kind of jump on me about something, and then I'd jump back. Because I'm kind of spitfirey too, you know. I come from Oklahoma.

F: The two of you could sort of slug away?

M: But I never held it against him and I'm sure he didn't me.

F: He never cut you then.

M: No, he wouldn't do that. He's not that type. Do you know him?

F: Yes.

M: Well, you don't think he's--?

F: What I'm trying to establish, among other things--you know, you have several images. You have the newspaper image, and you have the Kennedy image of Johnson. You and I know there are 6 or 8 or 10 different images of Johnson.

M: What would you call my image?

F: Yours is that of a friend.

M: Yes.

F: And that's what I'm trying to get.

M: Yes. And a very loyal, true friend. Although I didn't work for him, I loved him. I told him I wasn't going to, and he forgave me. He's a very, very forgiving man, very forgiving. He will sputter at you, you know that. But you know he'll forgive you.

F: Do you think he sort of enjoyed fighting with you on occasion?

M: Yes, I do, yes.

F: Sort of clashing steel?

M: Yes, sure. I don't think anybody likes anyone that's very subservient, and always agrees with you. I don't like anybody who would just agree with me whether they are sincere or not. Now if they're sincere, fine, but I can tell if they are sincere or not. And I can tell if they flatter me too much. I don't like it and I'm sure a real person doesn't like it--I'm sure Johnson doesn't like it.

F: Right. Did he ever ask your advice on any political problems?

M: No, no.

F: You must have talked a lot of politics in his presence though.

M: I'm not smart enough for him to ask that.

F: Oh well, I mean without talking about whether you are smart or not, he likes

to sound out opinions, and get various approaches to things. You went out to Chicago--or started at least to go to Chicago in 1968.

M: I was there the whole time.

F: Where were you physically? Did you stay at the Blackstone, or the Hilton, or do you recall?

M: I stayed at the Blackstone.

F: Tell me something about your experiences at the convention.

M: What convention? Tell me about the convention.

F: This is the one in which you had the blowup outside, you know, with kids and Mayor Daley.

M: That was this last one.

F: Right, this last one.

M: Oh no, no, now I'm getting it. No, I stayed at the Ambassador West--

F: So you were away from where the noise was.

M: Oh yes. I was going to give a party, but it got so rough I decided not to.

F: Were you in favor of Vice President Humphrey or were you just giving the party to help the party along?

M: I was for Humphrey, decidedly.

F: What did you decide there? That it was just getting to be too much of a clash of wills?

M: Oh it was awful, terrible!

F: And you decided a party wouldn't be very friendly then.

M: Dangerous, very dangerous.

F: I was there, too, incidentally.

M: I feel like never going to another convention. Didn't you think it was terrible?

F: It wasn't much fun unless you like conflict. Did you feel the Chicago police handled the situation as well as it could?

M: They did the best they could under the circumstances.

F: Did you have any feeling that President Johnson might come to the convention?

M: No. It would have been very foolish to have come the way they were feeling about him.

F: Have you seen him since he went out of office?

M: I'm trying to think--you see, I've been in Europe. I just got back.

F: You didn't go down for the dedication of the Library?

M: I couldn't. I was in Europe. I just got back.

F: So you haven't had much opportunity.

M: I haven't seen her.

F: How do you think she's taking his retirement?

M: Fine. I think they're both happy. Have you seen them?

F: Yes. I see her with a great deal of regularity, see him occasionally. In fact, I've seen her twice this week, or this past week.

M: In--?

F: In Austin.

M: How is she?

F: I think she's wonderful. She's very active.

M: What's she active in? This isn't on now, is it?

End of tape

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By Perle Mesta

to the

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Signed

Perle Mesta

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