

INTERVIEW I

DATE: January 11, 1974

INTERVIEWEE: MRS. JACQUELINE KENNEDY ONASSIS

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: Her Manhattan apartment in New York City

Tape 1 of 2

First part of tape missing (35 feet)

F: Let's continue, then, our broken interview. These are the things that make anecdotes, you know.

O: Would you like me to start where we were?

F: Let's start where we were. We may go back over some of it so that we can get it in your words, but we were talking about Vice President Johnson and your impressions of him.

O: And you had asked me did I think he was an effective vice president.

F: Yes.

O: And I said, yes, of course I did. He had such an expansive personality. Of course!

F: I presume that President Kennedy understood the problems of being a vice president, even though he hadn't been one.

O: Yes. As I was saying to you, he thought it would be a very frustrating job, and I think he tried to do everything to make Vice President Johnson feel as comfortable in it as possible. One thing Prime Minister MacMillan of England had said to Jack about President Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon, that Eisenhower never let Nixon on the place, impressed Jack a lot. Every time there was a state

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dinner he wanted the Vice President and Mrs. Johnson to come, too. I don't think the vice president before had automatically come to state dinners, but it became automatic under President Kennedy. They would always come upstairs. We would meet the state guests upstairs in the Oval Room and then walk down with the color guard, so that we would receive the state guests as a foursome, the President and the Vice President. Every time we had a private party, which was about five times I think in the time we were there, we'd always ask the Johnsons to be with us and our friends who weren't political friends.

F: Did you ever dance with the Vice President?

O: Yes.

F: Was he a strong dancer?

O: He was a good dancer.

F: What was he, pretty traditional, or what we'd say now, "square"?

O: Well, you see, dancing then was still traditional. Maybe the other was just starting. I think the twist was just starting.

F: The twist was coming in the early sixties.

O: But nobody really knew how to do it.

F: And your husband didn't have the back for it.

O: The Vice President danced with my mother. He was very gallant, courtly. She liked him very much. And my mother-in-law.

F: I judge he led when he danced.

O: I assume so, yes. Then if there were parties for children or something, I would ask Luci and Lynda to receive with me. They were

wonderful at that. Once we asked them to a state dinner on their own while their parents were away. I think they were in Asia. It was for the President of the Sudan. You know, young people at that time in their lives should be included in interesting things--anyway, they were wonderful. So that's the part about Jack trying to make [Vice President Johnson feel comfortable]. Those are social ways.

F: Did the President talk to you about sending the Vice President abroad in his place? He did make considerable use of him.

O: Yes. Do you mean did he discuss with me whether he should or shouldn't?

F: Yes.

O: No. But I think they decided, and I think he was very wonderful when he went abroad.

F: Did you ever get any reaction out of the President over the camel driver episode?

O: No. When my sister and I went to India we met the camel driver and his wife, his poor little wife completely veiled from head to toe.

F: She must have wondered what it was all about. I think he took it in rather good style.

O: Yes. ~ That was the expansive part of the Vice President's personality. I can't remember exactly what trips he went on or for what reason, but it seems to me they were all a success.

F: He made one to Berlin in particular about the time that the wall was built, before your husband went, and was received rather tumultuously. I know the President then issued a statement a couple of days later

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praising Vice President Johnson for what he had done for the nation and for him, et cetera, over there.

Did the President ever talk to you about the possibility of dropping Vice President Johnson?

O: No, never. Sometimes that would be in the papers or something, wouldn't it? I don't think he had any--I mean--

F: Just speculation.

O: Yes. The only thing I know about that is the fact that it would be brought up every now and then and was rather annoying. I don't think he had any intention of dropping Vice President Johnson.

F: Did you have any opportunity to observe Bobby and the Vice President?

O: Not really, no.

F: Speaking strictly from my own observations, it seemed to me that Lyndon Johnson and John Kennedy understood each other and had a fine personal and working relationship, and that although he was sort of on the periphery, Ted Kennedy did, too, but that something in the chemistry between Bobby and Lyndon was always abrasive.

O: I suppose from what you read now. I don't know if it was before. You see, I don't know about this more than from what we've discussed already. Bobby always had to do an awful lot of political, difficult work for Jack, didn't he? So I don't think Bobby was put in the most easy role at the convention, was he?

F: No.

O: Of going back and forth, or delivering--

F: Explaining to people.

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O: Yes. So maybe Vice President Johnson didn't like him then. And then afterwards I think the situation was automatically difficult, wasn't it? And then as you say, their temperaments were different. I mean Jack and Teddy had a more extroverted personality, would you say, than Bobby? But I was never alone with the two men.

F: On that sad trip to Texas, did the President talk about the fact that he was going down to heal Texas politics?

O: Yes. I know he was warned before not to go by Senator Fulbright, by Adlai Stevenson, by Bobby, to whom they had given messages. I know he got really upset. Vice President Johnson came to our hotel room in Houston the night before we went to Fort Worth. There was all of this about people not wanting to ride in the car with--I forget if John Connally wouldn't ride in the car or Senator Yarborough wouldn't.

F: According to the reports, Senator Yarborough wouldn't ride with Vice President Johnson at that time. They were at loggerheads.

O: I remember we had dinner in our room alone, Jack and I. Then Vice President Johnson came by, and they had a long talk. I know that was the point of the trip, to heal everything, to get everybody to ride in the same car or something. It was a long talk.

F: You've been interviewed ad infinitum on those hours, and we won't go over that unless you think there is some place that something ought to be added to the record. Did you have a feeling that the trip was going well?

O: Yes, I did.

F: You had made quite a hit in San Antonio and Houston, I know.

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O: There were such big crowds of such waving, nice, happy people. I certainly did have a feeling it was going well. There were, what, three motorcades I remember.

F: The President was pleased with it, I gather.

O: Yes.

F: Did you have any opportunity to observe the President's attitude toward John Connally?

O: Yes, I suppose so. I know he had always thought that Connally was very intelligent--this was before--had said how smart he was. I know he was annoyed with him then. I remember asking him the night in Houston sort of what the trouble was. I may have this wrong now, so perhaps you could check it against what I said before when I did my oral history. It was about ten years ago, wasn't it?

F: Close to it.

O: He said that John Connally wanted to show that he was independent and could run on his own and was making friends with a lot of-- I think he might have said "Republican fat cats"--and he wanted to show that he didn't need Lyndon Johnson, or something, and that part of the trouble of the trip was him trying to show that he had his own constituency. That's what I remember then, when I asked him.

F: Do you want to talk about those days following the assassination and your relationship with the Johnsons?

O: I tell you, they were wonderful to me. Lyndon Johnson was extraordinary; he did everything he could to be magnanimous, to

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be kind. It must have been very difficult for him. I don't know exactly how long [it was] before I could move. I moved out of the White House as quickly as I could, but it was a period of about--

F: Ten days or so.

O: Yes. That's rather a long time, isn't it? Now that I look back on it I think I should have gotten out the next--I didn't have any place to go.

F: You were in an extraordinary position. Most widows don't immediately have to vacate.

O: And I didn't have any place to go. It was Ambassador Galbraith who asked the Harrimans. I suppose one was in a state of shock, packing up. But President Johnson made you feel that you and the children [could stay], a great courtesy to a woman in distress. It's funny what you do in a state of shock. I remember going over to the Oval Office to ask him for two things. They were two things I thought that I would like to ask him as a favor. One was to name the space center in Florida "Cape Kennedy." Now that I think back on it that was so wrong, and if I'd known it [Cape Canaveral] was the name from the time of Columbus, it would be the last thing that Jack would have wanted. The reason I asked was, I can remember this first speech Jack made in Texas was that there would be a rocket one day that would go to the moon. I kept thinking, "That's going to be forgotten, and his dreams are going to be forgotten." I had this terrible fear then that he'd be forgotten, and I thought, "Well, maybe they'll remember some day that this man did dream

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that." I think that was a wish that he could have easily said, "Look, my dear, that's impossible. But he didn't. He called Governor Collins on the phone right away.

F: Did he do it while you were there?

O: I honestly can't remember. Or else he did it just after I left, so that when I was back in the house within an hour or so, he called me and told me that it was fine.

And the other one, which is so trivial, was: there were plans for the renovation of Washington and there was this commission, and I thought it might come to an end. I asked President Johnson if he'd be nice enough to receive the commission and sort of give approval to the work they were doing, and he did. It was one of the first things he did.

F: While he was still vice president there was a chandelier hung in the White House.

O: Yes.

Tape 2

F: I was asking you about the chandelier.

O: Yes. When we were doing the restoration of the White House we discovered that the two chandeliers that had been in the East Room (I know they were there under President Grant, I don't know if that's exactly when they came) were now in the Capitol, and one of them was in the Vice President's office. I was so anxious to have one of them back. You know until Theodore Roosevelt the president's offices had been in the White House, and what's now

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the Treaty Room had been used as the president's office then. And it was the cabinet room under President Andrew Johnson. We had Grant's furniture we found in storage, his cabinet table, [and] Rutherford B. Hayes' dining room chairs. Anyway, we had all the 19th century furniture there, copies of the treaties on the wall, and I asked Vice President Johnson's help in getting the chandelier back to hang there, too, and he made it possible. It was hung there, and then we had a little ceremony with Senator Mansfield, Senator Dirksen, all the people, and we all signed a piece of paper and hung it up there. But it wouldn't have come back if he hadn't helped.

F: After he became president you have a campaign coming up, and there's a memo in the Johnson papers by some of his assistants saying, "Get Mrs. Kennedy to do a spot on TV." That's all it says, for the 1964 campaign. Were you ever approached?

O: No, I wasn't.

F: I didn't know whether it was just somebody's idea that never got off the ground.

O: I wasn't [approached].

F: Could we take a little time and go back over some of this earlier and get this down? We were talking at the beginning about when you first were a young Senate wife and you were invited to Mrs. Johnson's for a luncheon.

O: Yes. When I first became aware of the Johnsons, it is Mrs. Johnson I remember meeting personally first. As a young Senate wife I

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remember she gave a lunch at their house in Washington and how nice she was, how she tried to make you feel at home. I can remember the house well. I think Lynda Bird was there; we went up to her room. There were about maybe twelve Senate wives. I remember the food we had. I know a really nice black lady cooked it. Maybe it was Zephyr, I don't know. Anyway, Mrs. Johnson, with that friendliness she has, just did everything to make one feel at ease, and I really liked her then.

F: This wasn't political. I mean she cut across party lines on something like this.

O: Oh, yes. I'd say maybe Mrs. Joseph McCarthy was there. It seems to me there were some new Senate wives and there were some older Senate wives. But there was always crossing of party lines. You never had the feeling that members of the opposite party were unfriendly, in the Senate, either with the senators or with their wives. There was always a nice feeling.

F: Then we talked earlier about the 1956 vice presidential race in which your husband narrowly lost to Senator Kefauver, I think to your husband's benefit, really. You were pregnant at the time so you weren't there, but I believe you were up probably all the night before?

O: No. I was staying in Chicago with Jack's sister, Eunice Shriver. He was staying downtown at a hotel, which was sort of a command post, and the only time I remember being involved was the night before the race when we were down at headquarters. I don't remember Jack there exactly, but I remember a lot of commotion

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and Bobby saying that we must try to get all the votes we could for the next day. I remember him asking me if I knew anyone in Nevada or some other states. I can remember being there a lot of that night.

F: Did you get the feeling that Senator Kennedy really wanted the nomination, or that it was kind of the thrill of the contest?

O: I think when something like that starts and gets momentum, then you want it, yes. I know when it was over and we flew back to New York afterwards there was kind of a letdown. Even though he may have consciously realized--I don't know whether he consciously realized right then or not--that, as you say, it probably was better politically for him to have lost. Once he was in he really tried, and once he lost he was let down.

F: Then I believe we talked earlier, too, about the fact that Senator Kennedy sort of looked over his shoulder at Senator Johnson as he approached 1960, but felt that Senator Johnson was paying too much attention to his Washington power and not enough to the national scene.

O: You mean in trying to get the nomination, don't you?

F: Yes.

O: I think I might have heard him say this later, that one reason Senator Johnson didn't get the nomination was that he thought he might have had it sewed up by knowing all the people in Washington; but that really the way that Jack got it was all those years he'd been going around the country--it was six years of our marriage, anyway, of

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every single moment of free time going out--and that that was the way it was gotten. He thought that that had come as a surprise to Senator Johnson at the convention.

F: He just hadn't paid enough attention to the road work.

O: Yes.

F: Too much on the home front.

O: Yes. I wouldn't say he put it in exactly those words. This is me speaking. But after all, Senator Johnson was majority leader then; I suppose he'd have to be in Washington more. But it is that road work and it is knowing every county person or delegate that in the end got him the nomination, when he really had the least chance, I suppose, being Catholic.

F: And you weren't at Los Angeles.

O: No. I was at Hyannis. I was expecting John.

F: And then they came up right after the nomination, the Johnsons did.

O: Yes.

F: Let's go back over that briefly.

O: All right. They came to stay with us in Hyannis. It's a rather small house we have there, and we wanted them to be comfortable so we gave them our bedroom. But we didn't want them to know it was our bedroom, because we thought they might feel they were putting us to trouble. There was a lot of moving things out of closets so there'd be no trace of anybody's toothbrush anywhere. I remember that evening how impressed I was with Mrs. Johnson. She and my sister and I were sitting in one part of the room, and Jack and

Vice President-elect Johnson and some men were in the other part of the room. Mrs. Johnson had a little spiral pad, and when she'd hear a name mentioned she'd jot it down.

F: Actually, she was in the conversation with you but kind of listening [to them].

O: Yes. They were sort of at the other side of the room. Or sometimes if Mr. Johnson wanted her, he'd say, "Bird, do you know so-and-so's number," and she'd always have it down. Yet she would sit talking with us, looking so calm. I was very impressed by that.

F: After you moved out of the White House did you have much contact with the Johnsons?

O: President Johnson used to call up. He used to really call up quite a lot in the beginning. He was so nice. They'd always ask me back to the White House, but they understood that I really didn't want to go back. I don't think I ever would have gone back if I could have helped it, but when our portraits were presented I sort of had to. Was that last year or the year before? But anyway, they would call up. Luci came when we were still in the Harriman's house, bringing Christmas presents. She gave John a fire engine. The Cabinet gave me this beautiful vermeil coffee set inscribed with the names of the President and Cabinet Members and close aides at sort of a surprise party when I moved to my new house in Georgetown. I think Bobby and Ethel organized that. The President came to that, completely by surprise. He just went out of his way to do everything like that.

F: Did you feel a sort of real warmth toward him?

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O: Yes, I did.

F: These weren't sort of perfunctory relationships, that he did it because it was the right thing to do?

O: No. The man had incredible warmth, didn't he? I really felt they were warm. I almost felt sorry for him because I knew he felt sorry for me. There wasn't anything anyone could do about it, but I think the situation gave him pain and he tried to do the best he could. And he did, and I was really touched by that generosity of spirit, or however you would phrase it. I always felt that about him.

F: Did you ever get the feeling that there really was a sort of a Kennedy staff as against a Johnson staff, and that the Kennedy staff was, oh, sort of out to get Johnson? You get a lot in the press about that.

O: I know you do. I never felt that while Jack was alive. Afterwards I was really in my own shell of grief, and when all those things are written and you read them, do they come through to your consciousness or not? I mean, nobody from the Kennedy staff was saying that to me. But I suppose it's natural in one sense. It was such an awkward way to come to the presidency, wasn't it. There should be a dividing line; this was an unnatural division.

F: It was so abrupt.

O: And then President Johnson asked the staff to stay on. Well, that was generous of him. I suppose he had to have the people there in the beginning, but I'm just thinking this now as you ask me. It was just difficult, humanly difficult.

F: Well, he wasn't their president.

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O: Yes. And they were all lost. I suppose it was mostly with the Irish ones, wasn't it, that they'd say it. You know that closeness of the Irish in everything, and then their man they loved gone in the most tragic way. It's just human. I should think that would happen anyway.

F: Did you ever have any pressure to come back to the White House while the Johnsons were in it? Did they ever make it strong?

O: They'd ask me to every state dinner automatically. Then Mrs. Johnson kept the restoration committee going and I'd always be asked to that, but I explained to her in writing and on the telephone that it was really difficult for me and I didn't really ever want to go back. I think she understood, but out of courtesy they just kept sending me the invitations.

F: When the Kennedy Rose Garden was dedicated and Mrs. Kennedy came, Rose Kennedy--

O: Did she? I thought my mother went.

F: I believe you're right. It was your mother who went.

O: No. It was just too painful for me to go back to that place. I suppose again that's where the press makes things very difficult. That was so generous of Mrs. Johnson to name the garden after me. I almost don't approve of a garden being named. I don't think it is any more now. That was so nice of her, but she didn't have to do that. So I suppose if they [the press] were all saying how awful of me not to come, I can see that was an uncomfortable position for her. I just couldn't go back to that place. Even driving around Washington I'd try to drive a way where I wouldn't

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see the White House.

F: You feel the Johnsons always understood your position.

O: Yes, I do. But I think when everybody's saying the opposite, I wouldn't blame them at all if they thought sometimes, "Listen, couldn't this girl just--." Because the press did blow it up an awful lot.

F: When William Manchester came out with his book there were a few paragraphs in there that the press picked up that didn't show Lyndon Johnson in too good a light. Did he ever get in touch with you about any of this?

O: Did President Johnson? No, but I went to court. The worst thing in my life was trying to get all those things of Mr. Manchester's out of his book. I've never read the book. I did my oral history with him in an evening and alone, and it's rather hard to stop when the floodgates open. I just talked about the private things. Then the man went away, and I think he was very upset during the writing of the book. I know that afterwards there were so many things, one, about the private things, which were mostly expressions of grief of mine and Caroline's that I wanted to take out of the book. And whether or not they got out they were all printed around. Now it doesn't seem to matter so much, but then I had such a feeling.

I know that everybody else wanted the political things unfair to President Johnson out. And the way that book was done--Now, in hindsight, it seems wrong to have ever done that book at that

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time. Don't forget, these were people in shock. Before we moved out of the White House, Jim Bishop was saying he was going to write a book, "The Day Kennedy Was Shot." All these people were going to do these things, and you thought maybe to just not have this coming up, coming up, getting more and more sensational. Choose one person, ask everybody to just speak to him, maybe that would be the right thing to do. Well, it turned out not to be.

F: Did President Johnson ever try in any way to get you to come out politically on any issue for him?

O: No, he never did. And I know, at least I heard, that he was hurt that I didn't vote in 1964. People in my own family told me I should vote. I said, "I'm not going to vote." This is very emotional, but maybe you can understand it. You see, I'd never voted until I was married to Jack. I guess my first vote was probably for him for senator, wasn't it? Then this vote would have been--he would have been alive for that vote. And I thought, "I'm not going to vote for any [other person], because this vote would have been his." Of course, I would have voted for President Johnson. It wasn't that at all. It was some emotional thing, that he would have been alive. They were all rather cross at me. Not cross, but they'd say, "Now please, why don't you? It will just make trouble."

F: "They" being the people around you?

O: Yes. Bobby said I should vote, and I said, "I don't care what you say, I'm not going to vote." It was just completely emotional,

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and then of course that got blown up into I don't know what.

F: Everything got blown up.

O: Yes. But that was why. That was really emotional; it was something a widow would do. It doesn't make any sense.

F: Emotion doesn't.

O: But that's what it was, and nobody approved of it. I think all of the rest of the Kennedy family went and voted.

F: But you never heard anything out of President Johnson from it?

O: No, the only thing would be something in the paper.

F: Was there a kind of tale-bearing to you from people, sort of Johnson watchers, who would come to you with this and with that? "Do you know he's doing so-and-so?"

O: No, not really, because I moved to New York. I got that house in Washington and stayed there until June of 1964, and then I moved to New York. There really wasn't, no. Then I wouldn't see all the people who were working there.

F: Did you have any opportunity to observe President Johnson in Bobby Kennedy's senatorial campaign up here? I know he came up once.

O: I didn't see them together, and I didn't participate in that campaign. Bobby didn't ask me to. I think that was nice of him to come up here for Bobby.

F: Do you think there's anything else we ought to add?

O: Unless you can think of anything.

F: I've just about run through my list of questions. What I will do in this is put together my notes from what we talked about earlier

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and feed them in with this and send you a copy, and we can see whether my memory and the tape coincide with yours and work it from there.

I surely do thank you for this, and I particularly thank you for your patience and understanding of a somewhat embarrassing situation for me.

O: Not at all. Oh, no, any time if you see blanks or anything and you want to fill them in or you think of other questions, I'm always here.

F: Good. Thank you.

[End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview I]

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Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis

JACQUELINE KENNEDY ONASSIS
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