

INTERVIEW I

DATE: October 13, 1983  
INTERVIEWEE: MOLLIE PARNIS  
INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette  
PLACE: Miss Parnis' office, New York City

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G: I want to begin by asking you to tell how you first met the Johnsons.

P: Well, I first met Mrs. Johnson when she was the Majority Leader's wife. I was in Dallas doing a fashion show, and she came in to buy a dress, and that was just a business relationship. But [when] I got to be really good friends with her was after President Johnson became president, in 1964, and she really needed help. Bess Abell was her secretary. Bess called me the first time and asked me to come to their apartment at the Carlyle and help Mrs. Johnson with some clothes. That was 1964, and after that, on an average of once a month or every six weeks I would either make a trip to Washington to see Mrs. Johnson, or she would come to New York and see me. I really did help her with her clothes, and we did become good friends.

G: I saw a letter in her files from you shortly after they entered the White House offering to help with the official wardrobe and to give her some advice.

P: Yes.

G: Was this what initiated Bess's call?

P: No, no. That letter came afterward, after I had been asked to come. What date was that?

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G: I believe it was in the spring of 1964.

P: He became president in November of 1963, and the first time I ever did anything for her was in the summer of 1964, so the letter must have gone before.

G: Well, I guess when a vice president's wife becomes first lady she really doesn't understand all of the imperatives of having a wardrobe for--

P: Particularly under those circumstances. But she had a marvelous, marvelous assistant in Bess Abell. Of all the first ladies' aides that I've known, Bess Abell was probably the most competent.

G: Why do you say that?

P: Well, Bess Abell's father [Earle Clements] was governor of a state. She was married to a successful young man. Wasn't he Drew Pearson's son?

G: Stepson.

P: Stepson. There's something about Bess Abell. I've known lots of social secretaries. Bess Abell was very special and still is. She knew where you had to wear clothes, she had a feeling for them, and she mostly had a knack for understanding Mrs. Johnson and being of help. Besides which, Mrs. Johnson was one of the few first ladies that really would listen, didn't make up her mind before she came into the room. I think that's what makes her still interesting. She always would come in with an open mind and listen to either what I had to say or what Bess Abell had to say. And Bess Abell was a big influence.

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G: Let me ask you to discuss generally the demands on a wardrobe that being a president's wife. . . .

P: Well, they would come to New York say about a minimum of four times a year, and Bess Abell would have with her a schedule of the events that would take place in the next three to four months and the events for which she would need clothes, which could be repeated and which couldn't be repeated.

G: Is there any rule of thumb there?

P: Certain rules, yes. I'd done Mrs. Eisenhower's clothes, remember. In the spring of the year, for instance, the first lady is guest of honor at the Senate wives luncheon. The routine was about the same, and I wouldn't be a bit surprised if it isn't still the same, but each first lady handles it differently. Mrs. Johnson was a much more active first lady than the others I had known.

G: I'm trying to get you to explain the requirements of a first lady's wardrobe. Is it just a question of having more clothes?

P: No. First of all, they don't buy very many prints. The reason they don't buy very many prints is that they're constantly photographed, and a print is too noticeable. They have to be sure that a dress "sits" gracefully. . . .

(Interruption)

G: --have to be photographed a lot--

P: Their requirements are different than the average lady who is just buying her spring wardrobe or fall wardrobe. A minimum amount of detail on a dress means that when it's photographed more than once it

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isn't obvious. Then of course they do have so many more functions they have to attend. It was nothing for the White House to have six important events a week, both luncheons and dinners.

G: I gather that the clothes would vary, too, on how formal the occasion was.

P: Certainly. The first lady needs more evening clothes than other women. She needs large assortments of clothes for trips. It depends on where they are going. If they are campaigning, she needs clothes to campaign in. If they go on state visits, they need clothes that travel well. Oh, they need many, many more clothes than the average woman.

G: Were these elements that she was aware of before you talked to her or were these things that you discussed with her?

P: By the time Mrs. Johnson came to New York, Bess Abell had discussed the schedule with her. I would tell her what was right for the occasion and sometimes she took my advice and sometimes she didn't. But between Bess Abell and myself--and Mrs. Johnson is a very determined lady--she, too, would make up her mind about what she wanted and what she didn't want. She had very definite ideas, and she has innately good taste.

G: Did some of these matters of taste rest on what the President liked?

P: One of my favorite stories about what the President liked is this. They were holding a state dinner for Madame [Indira] Gandhi, and Mrs. Johnson had asked me to come down to Washington and bring some clothes so she could select a dress for that dinner. I arrived at the White

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House. I always used to come there with an assistant and a fitter; an assistant to help handle the clothes, and a fitter--suppose Mrs. Johnson decided on something, we could take her measurements and get it ready. And the first dress I picked up was a green chiffon dress, and Mrs. Johnson said, "Oh, no, not green. The President really doesn't like green." Just as she said this the elevator opened--we were up in the residential section of the White House--and the President got out. He walked over to the rack and he picked up the green dress and he said, "Bird, now here's a dress I'd like to see you in." She tried in on, and p.s., I think there's a picture back there of Mrs. Johnson. If you get up, you will notice there's a picture with Mrs. Gandhi there. Do you see it? And there's that green dress that she has on. Oh, he had a lot of influence on her clothes. He had marvelous taste, and he had wonderful ideas. Do you want me to wander off into things about him?

G: Sure.

P: One, the President was, in my opinion, sort of the last of the big Texas spenders. I never met a man who was more generous, who loved to give presents more. Another thing that fascinated me about his buying of presents was that he would always have a list, not of the important friends' wives, but of the secretaries and the superintendents' wives, people who would never be able to afford a dress from me. He'd come in here with a great big list, but he'd never buy impersonally. He would say, "This is for Mary, this is for Lindy and this is for--" "I think she's a size six," and "She would look better in red," and "She

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would look better--" It was always very personal. He really genuinely loved to give presents. If I came there with a collection and the President was there, Mrs. Johnson would buy many more clothes than when he wasn't there. Mrs. Johnson is inclined to be careful with her money and not spend any more than is absolutely necessary. Not the President. He couldn't buy enough and he couldn't be generous enough, and he wanted her to have everything.

G: Yes. Was it difficult to get Mrs. Johnson to spend as much money on clothes as necessary?

P: It still is. Mrs. Johnson is much more careful with money. She's generous about anything you ever ask her for, or ask her to do, but the President genuinely was extravagant. He truly liked giving presents. I always thought that maybe that's how all Texans are. But he really cared about the little people around him. He was always buying one of my dresses for somebody who could not afford to buy a dress here.

G: Let me ask you a little bit about her travels. Were there any special requirements for dresses for trips?

P: Oh, sure. In 1964 when they were campaigning, she needed lots of clothes for all those trips. There were constantly special dresses for special occasions, either trips or parties or vacations or so on. Yes. Yes.

G: Did she ask you to recommend other designers and to help her select clothes that you didn't design yourself?

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P: No. I think the President had an idea that I owned all the dress houses in New York City. I am sure it never occurred to him that I only occupied one floor in this building and only employed about a hundred and fifty people. He was sure that I owned all the dress businesses in New York and was responsible for all the clothes women wore all over the United States, because very often he would ask me for things that I didn't make. I would usually get them for him. When I got close to the President, I was more comfortable with him than I was with Mrs. Johnson. Mrs. Johnson and I are very good friends now. We visit each other often, she at my house and I at the Ranch, and I could tell her anything and do anything, but never quite the same way that I could tell the President. I had a feeling that most of the people that were around him only told him what he wanted to hear, and that one of the contributions that I made to his life was that I really told it to him the way it was. And I think in the beginning it amused him that anybody would say what I did to him. Eventually he got to like it. I remember he used to talk to me about the press a great deal. He was very upset about the press.

G: Anything in particular?

P: Yes. I think he used to particularly complain to me about the New York Times. Mostly he complained about the New York Times because the publisher and the editor-in-chief and most of the executives of the New York Times are very good personal friends of mine, and he knew that. This one day we were in Acapulco. I was visiting Mrs. Johnson and the President. We were sitting out on the terrace, he and I

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alone, and he went on and on about James Reston at the New York Times, who had just done a piece. I listened to him for a while and then I said, "Mr. President, don't you believe in your heart that James Reston is a good American? Don't you believe that he cares about the country? It seems to me that if I were president I would send for James Reston and I would say to him, 'Instead of writing all about it in the paper, why don't you come and see me and tell me about it?' and maybe he has an idea. Maybe you'd be glad to get the idea." And he looked at me and started to laugh. He said, "Have I sent for Scotty Reston? Have I visited with him? I sat with him by the hour and thought I had him exactly where I wanted to, and the next morning I picked up the paper and, my God, he knocked my brains out!" And so I realized that my idea wasn't such a good idea.

G: Did he ever ask you to convey messages or--?

P: Oh, never, never. No. The President, he would complain to me about lots of things. Another time I remember he gave me his book [The Vantage Point] to read when it was in galley form. Again we were in Acapulco. It was about, oh, half past ten or a quarter to eleven at night. I was going to my room, and he called me back and he said, "Here, read this chapter tonight and we'll talk about it in the morning." I thought, oh, my God, I'm not a historian, I don't want to read a chapter. I'm on a vacation. But I thought if I knew what was good for me, I better read it.

So I read the chapter. I made some notes in the margins, and the next morning, sure enough, like a schoolteacher, he got me on the



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beach and he said, "Did you read that chapter?" and I said, "Yes, I did, sir." He said, "Well, what did you think?" and I said, "Well, I think if it goes to press the way it's written you're going to make a big man out of Eugene McCarthy. He's been dead politically now for I don't know how long, and in this chapter you say that he was much more interested in telling jokes or reading poetry than getting bills passed, and you go on to say several other things about him that aren't nice. I can just see the book being published and somebody picking that out and that making the front page of the New York Times. And if you thought all those things about him, how come you were considering him for vice president at one time?" He looked at me, said, "Damn it, I've given that chapter to I don't know how many people and nobody called that to my attention. You're right." And I don't have to tell you how pleased I was when I got the book, there wasn't a word about McCarthy in the book.

G: Really? Did he seek your advice on his own wardrobe?

P: Oh, sure. I made him shirts. I did lots of things for him that I'd never done for anybody else. I've never made men's shirts. But he kept kidding me and saying, "Listen, you're always doing things for Lady Bird and you never do anything for me," and I said, "All right, Mr. President, I am going to do something for you." So I came back to New York--we were in Acapulco--and got some special fabrics and made him some shirts. And the last photograph taken of him, I have it home on my piano, in 1972--he died in 1973, didn't he?

G: January, early 1973.

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P: January, yes. The last Christmas picture taken of him in 1972, Christmas, 1972, was in a shirt I had made for him. It's in a checked shirt.

G: Oh, the red and white.

P: Yes.

G: The John Wayne picture.

P: Yes. Where he's sitting there with a hat, I did that shirt for him.

G: Did he have any special requirements on his clothes that you know of?

P: Not that I know of. He was delighted with everything I ever gave him. Besides the shirts, I embroidered some slippers for him, which are in the Library.

G: They're on exhibit, aren't they?

P: Yes. Occasionally I sent him a sweater for his birthday. He was like a boy about that, he loved presents, he loved to give them and he loved to receive them. So I would go out of my way to bring him a present or send him a present.

G: What occasion do you think led to your friendship with the Johnsons? Do you think it was that initial session?

P: Well, the clothes started it, Mrs. Johnson and I. But it was the President, he was the one who began to invite me socially before Mrs. Johnson did. We met up in the residence and he turned to Mrs. Johnson and said, "Bird, why don't we ask Mollie down to Acapulco?" And she said, "Why don't we?"

Another favorite story of mine about the President is in August of 1972, that was the last time I saw him, I was spending a weekend at

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the Ranch and it was the weekend before McGovern and Shriver were going to come down and visit with the President. Mrs. Johnson is very methodical and still is to this day. If she invites you, the invitation will say, "Why don't you come Thursday at five o'clock until Sunday at four?" and somehow or other you know that you're to go at four o'clock. And, God, I didn't want to go home. I was at the Ranch, and it was like old times, the phones were ringing and the President was involved. He was having such a good time. He had put one over on McGovern by calling the little local newspaperman in from Fredericksburg or someone who was with a newspaper that came out once a week or something, a little weekly, and gave him an exclusive interview, and would not let McGovern bring any press with him down there to the Ranch. Wouldn't even let McGovern bring a photographer.

There I was knowing I was due to go home Sunday night, and Monday morning McGovern would be there. That was history in the making, and I really didn't want to go home. But I hadn't been invited for any longer. So when Mrs. Johnson wasn't around, the President and I were sitting underneath those live oaks, you know. I said, "Oh, gee, Mr. President, I wish I was going to be here Monday when McGovern and Shriver come." He said, "Well, why can't you be?" I said, "Well, I was only invited until Sunday night." Right then Mrs. Johnson passed by and he said, "Bird, Mollie doesn't have to be at home Monday at all. Mollie doesn't have to go home Sunday night, she can stay a few days." And what could poor Mrs. Johnson do? She said, "Well then, Mollie, will you stay?" and I said, "Of course I'll stay." But she was

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determined that I wasn't going to be there when McGovern and Shriver got there, so she made arrangements for me to go back on the helicopter from Austin to the LBJ Library, the helicopter that would bring McGovern in. McGovern and Shriver weren't coming in the same helicopter. McGovern would come in the first one. And if you've been to the Ranch, you know where the strip is.

G: Well now, John McCormack and Tommy Corcoran were out there before that.

P: Oh, I've been there many times with John McCormack and Corcoran, but I don't think they were there that weekend. As a matter of fact, I'm almost sure they weren't. They didn't stay over Monday. I was the only one who stayed over Monday, and I only stayed over because I asked the President.

G: Any recollections of that McGovern-LBJ meeting?

P: Yes. Anyway, Mrs. Johnson had me up bright and early waiting at the strip to go back on the helicopter that brought McGovern in, so I never even met McGovern. He got off the plane. I got in the helicopter, I went to the LBJ Library, and there were hundreds and hundreds of press people, as usually follow a candidate. I had lunch at the Library and McGovern and Shriver had lunch with the President at the Ranch, and when McGovern came back I was notified the helicopter was upstairs, and I came back to the Ranch.

As luck would have it, I came in the house and realized that Mrs. Johnson was out taking a walk, and so I called to the President. He was in his room stretched out on his bed, and I said, "Mr. President,

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it's Mollie." And he said, "Come on in." And there he was on his bed, and I said, "Hurry up before anybody gets here. What did you say to McGovern? What did McGovern say to you?" He said, "I told him to stop going around complaining about what a terrible country this is. I told him to go out and ask the people of the United States what other country in the world could a minister's son from South Dakota wind up being a candidate for president of the United States. I told him to stop complaining about the Defense Department, and I told him to go out and just stop suggesting cutting the defense budget. Why doesn't he just go out and say he's going to cut out the waste? Everybody's for cutting out the waste, and if he cuts out the waste, we're all with that."

When I left his room, I went back to my room and made notes, but I wasn't a good enough reporter to remember everything. But the next night, I was back in New York and McGovern made a speech. I think New York University, I'm quite sure it was. No, maybe [to] some brokers on Wall Street. Anyway, my God, there it was in the New York Times the next morning, where else could a minister's son be a candidate, he was going to cut out the waste. I remember writing a letter to the President. As a matter of fact--

G: It's there.

P: It's there. Saying "you may still be a good teacher," and I sent a copy of the New York Times story to the President so he could see it.

But those are some of the exciting, wonderful moments that I had with the President that I remember very well.

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G: You were invited to a lot of the state dinners.

P: Yes, I was.

G: One for Princess Margaret.

P: The first one was for Princess Margaret and Snowden, yes.

G: Anything about these state dinners that you recall? Talking to the President?

P: I never went to the White House that my heart didn't skip a beat. I used to say to myself unconsciously, "Will you look who's going to the White House?" I used to hope that some of my friends would see me. And to this day, there's something very exciting about being in the White House and talking to the President of the United States and being a part of what happens. One time I sat next to Hubert Humphrey at one of the state dinners, and I remember Kirk Douglas and Anne Douglas, who were very good friends of mine, were also invited to that dinner. So I said to the Vice President, "Mr. Vice President, do you think you can see Kirk Douglas from where you are sitting, because I want him to be impressed. I want him to see my seat." And the Vice President stood up and looked around and sat down, he said, "Oh, hell, Mollie, he's sitting next to Mrs. Johnson, so we're not going to impress him today."

G: You also attended a state dinner honoring Harold Holt.

P: Yes.

G: Do you remember that?

P: No, the one I remember most was the one for the Amir of Kuwait. I sat next to Dean Rusk at that one, and I remember the Amir got up and made

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his toast in Arabic and then after it was translated, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. He was saying something anti-Israel, and I turned to Dean Rusk and I said, "I don't believe what I'm hearing," and Rusk said, "That was a much better speech before it was translated."

(Interruption)

He said that was a much better speech before it was translated, because before it was translated we didn't know what he was talking about.

G: Anything else on these state dinners? Any conversation with the President?

P: No, the state dinners were like going to a party. For me, the high spots were the moments alone with the President, both at the Ranch and in Acapulco, and many times alone in New York. For instance, one evening I had been home for a couple of hours. I keep a cook and a waitress and a butler, and I decided I was going to stay home, so I told the butler and the waitress they could go and I told the cook I'd have a tray. I was in a nightgown and robe. It was a little after six. I was very tired. The phone rang, and it was the President, and he said, "Mollie, we're down at the Pierre Hotel. How would you like to come down here and have dinner with us? Lady Bird has gone out to the theater." I said, "Who's us?" and he said, "Jewel"--what's Jewel's last name?

G: Malechek.

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P: --"Malechek, and Tom Johnson, and Luci." And I said, "Is that all, Mr. President?" He said, "Absolutely." I said, "You promise you won't bring anybody else?" He said, "Why?" I said, "Why don't you come here for dinner?" He said, "All right, I'd like that." But you know, with the President you never could tell who else he would bring with him. So I said, "Don't bring anybody else, because I don't have any help." And at about six-thirty I went downstairs and said to the cook, who was there all alone, "You'll not believe it, but we're going to have President Johnson and Luci and Jewel and Tom Johnson," and she said, "Well, we'll think of something." Just as I was trying to arrange that, my son called and he said, "What are you doing?" I said, "You'll not believe it. I was going to go to bed, but President Johnson is coming, and there's just going to be the four of us." He said, "Oh, no, there's going to be five. I'm coming." I said, "Only if you promise to help me." He said, "I promise." So he came down. Last minute, Dorothy, the cook, got some dinner together and it was really very good. And he was so impressed. There's a letter in there in which he tells me about how pleased he was, the last minute. . . . And he spent most of the evening arguing with my son about some of his liberal tendencies, about how wrong he was.

G: Did he convince him?

P: No, I don't think so.

G: Any other occasions in New York. I know that he came up for that Urban League--



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P: Well, the most exciting dinner I remember was in 1971, I believe it was the last time he came to my house. This was I think on Thursday, and Henry Kissinger was coming to dinner. I was going to have sixteen people for dinner, and I had given all the orders at home and had come to my office. I'm sure it was 1971. When did the Pentagon Papers come out?

G: It was early seventies.

P: Seventies. It was right after Henry Kissinger had gone with Nixon, and he was coming to my house for the first time.

When I reached my office, I wasn't here an hour before the phone rang, and it was the President. He said, "Mollie, I think I'm going to come down to see you today." I said, "You mean down here?" He had never been here. He said, "Yes." "All right," I answered.

It was about noon when he got here. He had a list of things he wanted to do and presents he wanted to buy for people, and it was very exciting around here. Word had spread in the building that President Johnson was on the eighteenth floor. I was nervous, and also I had so much to do. But I completely forgot about the dinner at home. The next thing I knew it was about four o'clock in the afternoon and the President was still here. I knew he was going to go to the theater that night, and so I turned to him and I said, "Mr. President, I know you're going to the theater." It was when the shows in New York City opened at seven o'clock. And I said, "I know Mrs. Johnson told me you're all going to have something to eat before you go to the theater. It's getting late. You'd better go now." And he said, "All

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right." But I had been so nervous and excited that I forgot to send for my car, and I forgot I had to do some errands. So I said to the President, "Will you drop me off?" and he said, "Sure." I got in the car with the Secret Service, and when I got in the car I said to him, "I'm having guests for dinner tonight. Do you want to stop in after dinner?" and he said, "Who have you got?" I had a list of the guests, and he looked at it. It was arranged in alphabetical order, and I remember him saying, "The [Thomas Wardell] Bradens. Is that the guy who owned a paper out in Oceanside?" and I said, "Yes, sir." "Walter Cronkite," and he went down the list. He said, "[Arthur Ochs] Sulzberger. Is that Punch?" and I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "I may come in after dinner." I said, "Wonderful."

When I finally get home, I had to fix the place cards. I had to arrange some flowers. I had to dress. My guests were coming at a quarter to eight. At the dinner table, I had Henry Kissinger on my right and Punch Sulzberger on my left. I didn't say anything to Henry Kissinger, but I whispered to Punch Sulzberger, "President Johnson may stop in here later," and he said, "Here?" and I said, "Yes." He didn't seem too pleased and I didn't know why. Anyway, after dinner I took the ladies upstairs to my room. We weren't there five minutes when the phone rang, and it was the Secret Service saying the President was on 67th Street and should be there in seven or eight minutes. So I went downstairs and all the men had gathered around one table talking to Henry Kissinger. I said to Henry, "President Johnson is on his way up." He said, "Here?" And I said, "Yes, what

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do we do?" He said, "I guess we all stand up." By the time we stood up and went in the living room, the President was there.

For me it was a very exciting moment. After all the guests were gone, my son and I sat on the couch and he said, "God, Mother, that was an exciting evening. I wish Dad had been here to see it. But I wonder what was wrong with Punch Sulzberger. He acted like an idiot. There was the President of the United States and the Secretary of State, and Punch was outside all the time talking to the Secret Service man about his walkie-talkie." I said, "I don't know. He did seem nervous." We realized only two days later why Punch was so self-conscious. The Pentagon Papers came out three days later on Sunday. The last person in the world he would have wanted to see that night was President Johnson. The timing was very bad. So that was it. As a matter of fact, Harrison Salisbury writes about that party in his book on the Pentagon Papers [Without Fear or Favor: the New York Times and Its Times].

G: Did you have any involvement with him, with the Johnsons and the weddings, either of the girls' weddings?

P: No. No.

G: Okay. Let me ask you just another question on Acapulco. Did he work when he was down there or was it generally leisure?

P: Well, he was no longer president. But the President was always involved--the first couple of times he was working on his book, so he was constantly working on that. But the President always seemed to give the impression he was working, certainly.

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On the other hand, he had a marvelous flair for fun, a wonderful sense of humor. One of the things that comes to mind about Acapulco, another time I said to him, "Mr. President, Sam Newhouse is at Las Brisas." Las Brisas is a small hotel near the villa that we were staying at. And he said, "He is? Call him up and tell him to come over here tomorrow morning, nine o'clock, and have his breakfast with us." So I went to the phone and I called Sam Newhouse, who was a good friend of mine, told him President Johnson would like him at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. And he said, "Oh, tell the President I would love to come, but I get all of my telephone calls from the United States between eight-thirty and ten o'clock. If it's all right for us to come at ten, we'd love to come." I said, "Who's we?" He said, "Judge Kaufman. Judge Irving Kaufman is here with me." I said, "Wait until I go and ask the President." So I went outside to the beach and said to the President, "Is it all right if Sam Newhouse comes at ten"--explained what he was doing--"and he'd like to bring Judge Irving Kaufman." He said, "Sure. Tell him to come at ten."

So, ten o'clock, Sam Newhouse arrived with Judge Irving Kaufman and their wives. We spent some time on the beach, and the President looked up at Sam and said, "Sam, who's going to be the next president of the United States?" and Sam Newhouse, who was a very modest, retiring man in spite of the fact that he owned all those newspapers, said, "I don't know. I thought that's what you were going to tell me." He said, "Goddamn it, Sam, if I owned twenty-two newspapers, I'd make up

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my mind who I wanted to be president of the United States and he'd be president!"

G: (Laughter) Any other examples of his sense of humor?

P: Oh, yes. My favorite example is--but I have to get this right in sequence. Mrs. Johnson had a niece who was married to a young man by the name of [Donald] MacArthur. Is that correct?

G: Yes. Diana.

P: They were spending the weekend in Acapulco when I was there, and the night before they went out, as most young people do, to have a good time and see the town. And when we got to lunch the next day, the President said to Diana, "Did you have a good time last night?" and I looked at the President and said, "Did you see this morning's paper?" (Interruption)

I looked at the President and said, "Did you see this morning's paper?" and he said, "My God, was that about them?" and I said, "Yes." The MacArthurs said, "We didn't do anything," and I said, "Oh, you should never have used the President's name in asking for a table, and then complaining about where you were sitting and telling them you were guests of the President." The President picked it right up and said, "Goddamn it, how many times have I asked you not to do that? Why do you go?" Well, this went on for two or three days later. The poor man was nearly crazy. We had him convinced that there was a story in the paper about his asking for privileges because he was the President's nephew or something, when he had never done anything. But

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the President just carried it on. We really had a good time. We'd go to meals and laugh. This poor man was suffering so.

G: He had an ability to exaggerate things, didn't he?

P: The President?

G: Yes.

P: Yes.

G: Part of his humor.

P: Well, that was the way it would go. And it also would get almost cruel, because while it was funny the first half hour, this poor guy uncomfortable and unhappy for a couple of days, really, it was more than I had intended.

G: Did Mrs. Johnson's clothes reflect her activities besides the official state dinners and things? For example, how would you tie a wardrobe into her interest in beautification?

P: Well, they reflected her interest in her kind of life. Clothes are a way of life. What's right for a little secretary wouldn't be right for me, what's right for me would not necessarily be right for Mrs. Johnson. Mrs. Johnson has definitely a certain taste that's right for her. She has an intuitive sense of what's right for her. And she does pick clothes that fit in with her way of life, and they do until today.

G: If you were going to criticize her wardrobe, say in 1964, would you say that her clothes were too conservative?

P: No, that she didn't have enough of them. Mrs. Johnson doesn't throw

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her money away and doesn't throw it around. She was not as generous and as outgoing with money as the President was.

G: You're telling me also that she did pay for her clothes.

P: Oh, not only did she pay for them, but would never accept--I must say that I have never had any experience with any first lady who would take anything for nothing, and I've made clothes for lots of first ladies. Never met anybody who would even have a scarf for nothing. Most first ladies that I knew, I became friends with, and we would exchange a Christmas present or a birthday present or an Easter present, but that would really be all we'd exchange.

G: Anything on beautification and her wardrobe or your contacts with her?

P: No. If she was going to Texas we'd try to make a yellow dress that would fit in for the occasion. No, clothes really didn't have anything to do with beautification.

G: I noticed in one of the letters Bess wrote to you explaining that Mrs. Johnson wanted a longer version of a particular dress, a yellow dress that she had.

P: Yes.

G: Does a designer have a problem with this?

P: No. No. Most designers design with a hope and a wish that their clothes will wind up on the backs of women and it will make them happy. If I had my choice, I'd like them to wind up on the chicest, youngest, best figures in the world. But the clothes that you make are not made in a vacuum. Subconsciously when I'd be making some clothes, the fact that Mrs. Johnson was tied up with beautification

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would help me when I would look at prints to see if there was something that looked like a wildflower of Texas or something like that.

G: But, if she wants to modify a designer's creation--

P: It doesn't bother me. No two people like exactly the same thing.

If somebody made a suggestion to do something to a dress that I thought would spoil it, I wouldn't do it. But very often it's an improvement.

(Interruption)

G: Can you think of anything else that we haven't talked about?

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I



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