

INTERVIEW IX

DATE: July 14, 1987

INTERVIEWEE: MARY RATHER

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: Mrs. Rather's residence, Gonzales, Texas

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: Let's start with your being asked to come back to Washington that last year in the--do you remember how Mr. Johnson invited you to join the staff?

R: I've tried to recall it and then my mind goes on to something else, which is trying to sell this house, and then disinfection [*sic*], and I just--I think, well, I guess if Mike asked me questions, maybe it will come back to me. But that was the year, wasn't it? Of course, that was his last year in the White House.

G: 1968. Was it around Christmas time that he asked you? Or maybe before that?

R: I think, if I remember correctly--and if you know more than I do you can correct me. I believe that they asked me to come out to the LBJ Ranch. They were home on a--like he used to come as often as he could just to get away and go home and relax and think about things when he wasn't so busy, like he was as president. They asked me to come to the Ranch and see them. And he said to me--and I do remember this very, very distinctly--Lady Bird had gone over to the--it might have been Christmas time. She had gone over to the Moursunds. The Moursunds were having a party and she had gone on ahead. I think maybe, in the kitchen at the Ranch house, some things had been prepared

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that could sit on the table for all the guests coming in. She just went on a little bit ahead of time, and then I left with Mr. Johnson. I remember that as we crossed the cattle guard coming right off of--out there at the Ranch house, not a cattle guard further on, but the one that's right there as you get to the head of the--to the Ranch house, to the yard. I remember it because the car bumped a little bit as we went across [it], and just as it bumped, as it went over the cattle guard, he punched the button to raise the window between him and the driver and the Secret Service man. And he said, "Mary, you've been in every campaign that I have made; you've had a part in it. And you worked for me also when I was congressman and senator. And you campaigned with me for the presidency, but you never have worked at the White House and I would like for you to have that experience, and I'm not going to run for reelection." He said, "Can't you find a way to come to Washington and work the last little while that I will be president?" I don't remember how many months it was. You might know from the records. It seems to me I might have been there five or six months or something, but that's all. And it was at the end, you see.

I told him I would try. It turned out not to be so very hard a thing to do. I already had Nancy in college in Washington, at National Cathedral School [Mount Vernon College]. I didn't know though how on earth I could go to Washington and work and have Betsy. She was younger and--I don't think she was quite high school age yet. But I called the headmistress of--where did I say Nancy was in school?

G: Mount Vernon.

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R: That's right. I called the lady that was the headmistress at National Cathedral School for Girls. Now that wasn't college; that was just a prep school for younger people. I asked her, if she had any vacancies, would she consider accepting Betsy as a student. It was a very lucky thing. She had been the headmistress there for twenty or thirty years but she was originally from San Antonio, Texas, and she knew my name although I don't think I had ever met her. Also, one of Betsy's cousins was at National Cathedral, too. What was her name? It was on the tip of my tongue a minute ago. Anyway, the headmistress said, "I will accept Betsy. I know the Rathers. I know the name. I know who you are. But I cannot accept a child sight unseen. Can you bring her to Washington?" That was what happened. I took her up there and she accepted Betsy.

G: So you brought Betsy to Washington?

R: I did, and she was accepted. She had a cousin that was there, who was older than she was, but that made her feel a little bit better, [and] then she knew that her sister was at Mount Vernon College. And I went to work at the White House.

(Interruption)

R: Recently Nancy and Drew were on a trip to New York and New England, and then coming back they stopped in Washington and saw the sights there. Nancy told me that all of a sudden they passed an apartment building and she said to Drew, "Aunt Mary used to live there! And Betsy and I used to come and spend the night with her when we were here in school." She remembered the building.

G: Where was it?

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R: It was right out on Connecticut Avenue, on the corner of Connecticut and whatever the street is you turn on to go to the Shoreham. What's--I've forgotten it.

G: It's Calvert or Woodley.

R: Calvert Street was the name of it. Betsy could spend the night or the weekend away from National Cathedral once a month or once every six weeks, something like that, if she was in the hands of relatives or somebody that the headmistress knew, knew she was in good hands. Nancy of course in college had a little more freedom. But she recognized that building. I've forgotten the name of the apartment house.

G: How was it different working in the White House than it had been working in the Senate or the House?

R: For my part at least, it was a lot slower, because we had more employees in the White House available for everything on earth, whereas when I worked for Mr. Johnson as a congressman or senator there was a much smaller force of people working for him, and we all just had to work ourselves to death to get it done.

G: When you talk about more people are you referring to aides and secretaries, or just secretaries, or just aides? Did he have more--

R: You mean at the White House?

G: Yes. Did he have more of each in the White House or more of both? Advisers--or are you talking largely about the secretarial force?

R: Well, I guess I was really talking about both. There were three of us who were secretaries in the little office right outside the Oval Office.

G: Who were they?

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R: Marie Fehmer, Juanita Roberts and me. For a little while there was another girl there from New York, but I've forgotten her name now. I don't think she was there all the time. The Oval Office was over here on this side of our office and on the other side there was the Cabinet Room. It made it interesting because every time there was a cabinet meeting they all came through our office to go into the Cabinet Room. So I got to see and I met a lot of people. Some of the cabinet members I knew, but not all of them. Then, too, when visitors came to see Mr. Johnson--I don't mean just Texans that went up there, but I mean people from all over the country or even from foreign countries. Well, I remember meeting--I've got a picture upstairs. I remember being introduced to and shaking hands with--what was his name, of Iran?

G: The Shah.

R: The Shah of Iran. And he was covered with medals just all over the front of him. When he was introduced to me--of course we always stood up when someone like that would come in the room, and President Johnson would introduce us, "These are my secretaries. This is Mary Rather." And he'd say something about me and then he would introduce him to the next one. I remember the Shah of Iran bending double over to shake my hand and to put his--or rather, he put his face down to it as though he would kiss it, although he didn't quite kiss it. You know that custom, how they do that.

Several others I met like that. The King of Sweden I met. Who else? I've forgotten them now.

G: Did Mr. Johnson elaborate on why he did not plan to run again in 1968 either when you were driving around in the car or later?

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R: He said to me, and I don't know whether to other people or not, "I've been in public life a long, long time. I've been vice president too." And he said that he had finished out Kennedy's term when Kennedy died so unexpectedly, and then he had had a full term of his own, and he said filling out Kennedy's term was almost a full term. And he said, "I feel that that's enough, that you shouldn't just keep on staying here even if you could get reelected." He had had almost two terms as president. He said, "I'm tired," and he said, "I'd like to go home." You know he was always saying he wanted to go home. When he was congressman and when he was senator and when he was whatever he was, he always yearned for a little time to come along when he could just fly on back to the LBJ Ranch even if it was just for Friday, Saturday and Sunday, just a short stay. It seemed to rejuvenate him. But at that time I was talking about a minute ago, toward the end of the presidency, he said that he wanted to go home and he did not intend to run for a second term of his own.

So that's what he did. And we went back to Texas and I worked for him. He told me he would have the LBJ Library and I could work for him there, and I did until he died.

G: You talked about how the working situation had changed. In the White House you had a lot more people so the pace was slower. You didn't have to do the work of--

R: Yes. Certain people were in charge of certain things. Whereas when we worked up at the Capitol all of us had to know everything we could know, you know, be able to answer any question. I saw somebody recently--let's see. Anyway, she asked me if I remembered a certain man in Dallas. He said that whenever he needed something in

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Washington--now this doesn't mean when I was at the White House, but when I was in the congressional office or the senatorial office--he said, "I used to go to Washington a lot but I found out that all I had to do, I could stay right here in Dallas and pick up the phone and call Mary Rather," and whatever he needed or whatever he wanted to get more information about, he said I could find it out for him and call him back and he didn't have to come to Washington. (Laughter)

But that's the way we worked in Mr. Johnson's office. I'm not taking credit for anything that the rest of the people couldn't do, too. His name was Lamar Holley. I don't know that that name ever came into . . .

G: Well, was Mr. Johnson himself different? Did you observe a change in the way--? Did he slow down also? Was he more mellow? Was he less driven than he had been earlier?

R: He was less driven, but on the other hand, things were slower. I don't know whether I can explain it at all. I don't think I'll even try. But it took things a long time to get all the way around the White House. It would have to be considered by one person for some reason and another person for another reason. It would finally get to the President's desk. And he had a stack on his desk every day of things to review, files and papers and things that concerned the presidency. He either had to okay them or not okay them, either sign it or put a big X through it.

G: Was this stuff he did during the day and then he had an additional stack of material for the night reading?

R: Yes. People would work late at the White House and he might finally--he did too. But he might eventually get on over to the mansion and eat dinner with his wife, although it

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might be late and she'd be waiting for him. Or he might have to go to some public event. But these things that he had to review and had to approve--and he was the last word--they would be brought to him. Some people worked at night, worked night shifts instead of day shifts. It would be brought to his bedroom at some point during the night, not right into his bedroom but into the anteroom, a little study or whatever the room was. But then the next morning when he opened his eyes it was there on the table, or on his breakfast tray, and he would have to start with it again. He always woke up early, real early. As I go back to it, though, I remember he said, "I want to go home. I'm tired."

G: Did he seem tired to you when you were up there in the White House?

R: Yes. He even seemed tireder there than he felt in Congress, because he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. In Congress he was just representing a congressional district or as a United States Senator he was representing the state of Texas. Representing the state of Texas was enough--(Laughter)--and we'd all know--we're talking about the year 1968, not all the years he was in Congress. And I won't go into what a dramatic and effective leader he was. I don't think there's ever been one like him.

G: Tell me about the night reading. What did this consist of? There was a packet, I understand, of material that he would take with him, literally take it to bed with him.

R: It could be anything. It could be a big, thick thing with regard to the Fish and Wildlife Service. Or it could be a world event. A lot of that night reading, though, that was brought up to him was not the kind, I don't think, that went all around the White House and everybody got to see it.

G: But who determined--?

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R: Well, I think there were several people who determined it. Mr. [Walt?] Rostow was one of them, I believe. Who else am I trying to think of, was another one? And like George Christian, for example, would review a lot of things that not everybody in the White House saw. I just don't remember who--and I didn't always see it myself either. A lot of it was very, very secret.

I lived at that place on Calvert Street, though, as I said, and I had Nancy and Betsy, too, to look after. But eventually it was getting very close to the end of Mr. Johnson's term as president and he told me one day to just give up my apartment, pack up everything I had that I didn't have to use every day and come on down to the White House and stay. So I slept there and I ate there. Well, I ate in the cafeteria over in the Executive Office [Building]. I remembered, though, to bring everything I had and park in the parking space between the mansion and the Executive Office Building. You had to have a permit, and I had one, but my car--see, some things, I had them in my car but I didn't intend to--they were things that I didn't have to fool with everyday so I never did unpack the car. And the car looked so unsightly parked over there that Mr. Johnson told me to get it out of sight.

(Laughter)

And I had to find a place in the back parking basement somewhere and lock it up.

I would say that one of the most memorable times in my life while working at the White House, and it was in the year of 1968, the last year--I think Lady Bird had gone to New York or somewhere. Neither Lynda nor Luci were there. And President Johnson had gone back to the mansion but I was still over in the office, and he called me and said,

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"Dick Russell wants to come down and see me, and I've told him to come on and eat dinner with me. I'm the only one here." Then he asked me, wouldn't I like to come over and eat dinner with them. He knew that I was so fond of Senator Russell, that I just loved him to death. I was thrilled and I said, "Yes, sir. I'll be right over there." I came and he and Senator Russell and I--I think maybe we had a little drink, maybe, at the end of a long, hard day. Then we went into the family dining room and the three of us had supper. I don't believe anyone else was there. I can't remember anyone except for the three of us. Like I said, he said he was all by himself there. Lady Bird was gone.

They talked and they talked and I really didn't hardly say a word. I just listened.

G: What did they talk about?

R: Don't ask me now this many years later, like twenty years later. I don't remember. I expect they talked a lot about Congress.

G: Did they reminisce, do you think?

R: Kind of.

G: Or were they talking about current issues?

R: They laughed.

G: So it was light.

R: Yes. They were enjoying being with each other again, because they used to see so much of each other when they were in the Senate together, and when Russell was a congressman, too. Mr. Johnson, I believe, was just working for a congressman and Russell was one, a very young congressman then. Finally, though, Senator Russell said he better leave--

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(Interruption)

G: We were talking about the exchange between Mr. Johnson and Senator Russell that night. You said they were laughing a lot.

R: Well, it was just a lovely, lovely evening. Senator Russell was not well; he then had cancer--now everybody didn't know it--and he had no intention of running for reelection. He was retiring. But I just remember that when we finished dinner, they sat around the table and talked a good while longer after they finished eating. But then he said he'd better go home. We walked out from the dining room over to the--well, we were upstairs, I guess, on the second floor, in the family dining room. That's where we ate, I guess. But then we came downstairs and we walked out the South Portico. It was a beautiful moonlit night and all the trees and the shadows and everything. We stood on the steps--I started to say we stood on the steps and talked, but I didn't really do much talking; I just listened.

Well, I just remember that it was a wonderful occasion and I remember that there was some controversy about Mr. Johnson and Senator Russell having a falling out. I don't think they really did have a falling out. I know that he believed something should be done one way and Mr. Johnson believed it should be done another way, but they had been friends forever. And I think that each one of them understood the other. His car was waiting out in front when they saw him come down the steps. And we walked all the way down the steps. And the car came, the driver got out and opened the door for him, and we said good night. That was the last time I ever saw him. But it's just one of the memorable occasions of my year of 1968 at the White House.

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- G: What did President Johnson say about Senator Russell after he left? Did he tell you his estimate of the man?
- R: Well, I don't know that he did. I know that they didn't agree on things, but I think each one understood the other.
- G: Did they talk that evening about any of the issues that they disagreed on, like the Abe Fortas nomination?
- R: I don't think they did that night. I don't remember that they did. I think that they talked about old times, and they laughed, remembering the old days when they were both much younger and both striving so hard in Congress.
- G: Do you remember Mr. Johnson's March 31 speech? Were you there then?
- R: Well, tell me a little bit about it. I suppose I was there.
- G: When he announced that he was not going to seek or accept his party's nomination.
- R: Oh, yes. I remember that.
- G: Were you in the White House?
- R: Just as shocked--(Laughter)--as other people were. Well, I think I was right there listening to him make it.
- G: Tell me what you remember about it. Did you know ahead of time that he was going to add that ending?
- R: No, I don't think I knew that at all. It was not in his prepared speech. If I remember correctly I suppose that that speech is in the LBJ Library, but I think he said that himself at the end of the speech. He put it in and I don't think anyone knew it but Lady Bird. I may not be correct, but that's what I think.

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G: Well, I think he had had some people working. Horace Busby had been there talking to him about it, and Arthur Krim--

R: It's true, and I think George Christian and Arthur Krim. He might have discussed it with them, I don't know. But I was not aware of it, and I was shocked when I heard it.

G: But he had told you earlier that this was going to be his last year. You just didn't know he was going to make an announcement.

R: That's right.

G: Or did you not really--did you think that maybe after all he would run?

R: Well, I heard him say before that he wasn't going to do this and he wasn't going to do that, and he'd end up doing it because so many people would say, "Lyndon, you're the only one that can. You've got to do it." I think nearly every year of his life almost he said he wasn't going to run again for the House or he wasn't going to run again for the Senate or something. But he was just talking to himself. And I never did really believe it. But I did not mind at all that he didn't run for the presidency again. I agreed with him that he had finished Kennedy's term and he had--and like I told you, he told me months in advance that he thought he had served long enough and it was time for somebody else. But I don't know that I quite believed it because I thought that some people would talk him into it again. But I knew too, like he said and it showed on his face; it showed in the way that he walked. He used to walk--he always was a man--I read a book once a long time ago when I was--I used to read myself to death when I was a child growing up and in high school and in college and everywhere, everything I could get hold of. And there was a book entitled, *A Young Man in a Hurry*. When I got to know Mr. Johnson I always

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thought, "He's that young man in a hurry," and he was. But he was tired. And also I think he knew better than anyone else the state of his health. Of course he was checked by doctors constantly. He was checked by doctors regularly, even after he had left the presidency and gone back to the Ranch to live.

But he told me one time that he thought he knew some things that the doctors didn't know. He said, "You can feel it in your body," or something to that effect. "You can feel it inside of you."

G: Do you think he thought he was sicker than the doctors--or not as healthy as the doctors thought?

R: I think he thought his heart was in very bad condition, for one thing, and another thing, that he was dead tired. He never did anything halfway.

G: What was the family's reaction to his March 31 speech?

R: Oh, well, I think Luci and Lynda shed some tears. But it was--I don't think they were broken-hearted or glad to leave the White House or sorry that their daddy wasn't going to be president any more. I don't think it bothered them a great deal. They thought their father was a great man, and I think that they--Luci and Lynda could argue on one side or the other of something just like he could. And if your daddy made a dramatic speech like that I'd expect tears would come in your eyes, maybe.

But, no, I don't think they were real upset, and I don't think Lady Bird was at all, although she'd been a wonderful, wonderful first lady. I think she was glad to come home, too. She missed her friends that she'd made in Washington through the years. I'm sure she missed some of the things they did in Washington, but I think she felt she had

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had a full life and it had been a good one, and if he wanted to come home, why, she wanted to come home. She wanted to do what he wanted to do.

G: Did Mr. Johnson ever have second thoughts, do you think, afterward? Did he ever consider getting back in the race?

R: No. I think he felt that he had done his best, and that was that and it was over. I know that Lady Bird knew that he was not well. I guess the White House doctors knew he wasn't well. But I don't think the public ever knew that he really was exhausted and that he really had troubles. It seems to me he had some other trouble, too, beside the heart, but I've forgotten now what it was.

He could still joke sometimes. I remember once after he had retired and was living at the Ranch and I was working at the Library in Austin but I would go out to the Ranch maybe twice a week or something like that, carrying things from the Library out there for him to go over. Sometimes I'd spend the night and sometimes I'd go on back the same day. One day I went out there--it was the day that I usually went--and I hadn't phoned him that I was coming but it was the day that I usually went out there or one of the days I usually went. And I came in the house and he was at the lunch table and he had some friends there. They were from Amarillo. There was all kinds of laughter going on in the dining room. I went in there to see who was there and what was all going [on] and they all jumped up because I knew all of them and had known them for many, many years. They grabbed me and hugged me and Mr. Johnson said, "Sit down, Mary, and eat lunch with us." They just kept on talking and they kept on laughing. He had the time of his life. I've thought of that sometimes--because it wasn't much later when he died.

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G: January 1973. So he had from January 1969 to January 1973. Is that right?

R: I didn't realize that that was that long.

G: Who was out there from Amarillo, do you remember?

R: Oh, shoot. I guess I could have said them if I hadn't--Lawrence Hagy was one of them, but there was another one. There were two or three of them. Well, his name will come to me and I will tell you and you can insert it. He was a cattleman and lived in Amarillo, and very rich and very charming, but a very everyday kind of person. He was someone that I knew for a long, long time. I think I knew him as long as I knew Mr. Johnson. Well, I'll think of his name. I wish I had written it down. Maybe I did. Do you suppose there's any memo about who was there?

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview IX

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MARY RATHER

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