INTERVIEW II

DATE: August 29, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: JUANITA ROBERTS

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: Colonel Roberts' apartment, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

F: I don't think I can be formal with you, Juanita, so it's going to be Juanita. Tell us a little bit about where you came from and the general road to the White House. This is not log cabin to White House in your case, I can see.

R: All right. Well, I think maybe I'd better start out by saying that when I use Colonel with my name, I'm Mary J. D. Roberts; that's why some folks haven't been able to find me in the phone book.

F: I have a number of relatives who have been renamed by the service.

R: Yes. An old-timey sergeant made me take my birth certificate name as my first one.

Well, I came to the White House with President Johnson from his vice presidential office. On that day I was not with him in Dallas.

F: You had been detailed to him at what stage in his career?

R: Well, I had come to work for him--

F: In other words, how did you ever get connected with him?

R: I met him in 1938 and did a few--

F: Were you in the service then?

R: No, I was a housewife. I was married to Herbert Ray Roberts, who was one of his NYA boys, and met him of course because of his and Ray's friendship and past association.

F: This was in Texas?

R: Yes, in Marshall, Texas.

F: You're from Southeast Texas originally?

R: Port Arthur, Texas. In 1941, through his interest in Ray and expanding Ray's opportunities and experiences, we moved to Washington and Ray went to work for Mr. Sam Rayburn. We saw a lot of the Johnsons in that year; we were neighbors of the John Connallys and the Waddy Bullions and the Eugene Worleys. And the Texas [State] Society was active. Mr. Johnson was a go-getter even then, and some evenings all of us wives would wind up joining our husbands on the Hill to work in his office, addressing envelopes to send out free Department of Agriculture seeds or farmers' bulletins or baby books, or what have you.

F: Did you get involved at all in his senatorial campaign in 1941?

R: Yes.

F: Was this before you came up, or after you got up here?

R: No, that--you're talking about the 1941 campaign?

F: Yes, against W. Lee O'Daniel and Gerald Mann, originally.

R: Yes. Mrs. Johnson was having a tea that afternoon at their apartment in Woodley [Park Towers] Apartments for a former colleague from Oregon, a former congresswoman, Nan Honeyman I think her name was. She [Mrs. Johnson] got a telephone call from Mr. Johnson;

he was calling from the White House. He told her he had just announced for the Senate, and that he was leaving and to get him a bag packed. And he flew out that night.

F: Did she seem surprised?

R: Well, there was so much excitement--I'm confident that they'd talked it over, because I think that they have been a team always and that they have talked over major decisions. But I don't remember anything of her showing surprise to the crowd; there was excitement, but--

F: Added a little fillip to the party.

R: It surely did. At any rate, I was asked to go down. Mrs. Johnson and I left the next morning and drove down. We went the favored route down through the valleys in Virginia and across Tennessee and into Texarkana, stopped off in Marshall. You know, her home was just outside of Marshall. Then we drove on to Austin and down to San Marcos where he opened that campaign. And I stayed in Texas, making my base out of Marshall. I was based in Marshall, but I worked that whole East Texas [area]. Oklahoma to the Gulf along the Louisiana line, that was my women's activities group.

F: What did you do mainly?

R: Well, it was a combination of meeting people and interesting them in Mr. Johnson, because he had been a person of local acquaintance.

F: Yes, you had a problem on your hands in making a statewide candidate in a big state.

R: That's right. So having been a home demonstration agent, I knew the rural women and I knew organizations, and that kind of thing, and had worked that area pretty thoroughly in being a judge at county fairs.

F: Where had you been a home demonstration agent?

R: Nacogdoches. And having district-wide activities. So I knew a good many people in that area. Mrs. Johnson gave me a lot of names, and of course the menfolk who were associated with the campaign had ideas of what to do. It was selling people on the man, persuading them to become campaign workers and furnishing them with materials to use in campaigning. Then of course when he would come into the area, it was a combination of advance work as we know it now.

F: To make sure somebody came.

R: That's right. Just a typical campaign activity. But it was interesting then because he was not then known widely outside his own area.

F: How long did you stay on this campaign trail?

R: Until, well--

F: It was roughly from when to when?

R: Let's see. He announced in April, and I believe it was about a six-weeks period.

F: You were there almost for the whole campaign?

R: I was there the whole time. Walter Jenkins volunteered his automobile since he was staying up in Washington, and I used his car--put ten thousand miles on it in those six weeks. Then Walter came

down for the last weekend and so did Ray Roberts. You know, the Texas Election Bureau conceded that election to Mr. Johnson on Sunday evening, and we left Monday morning to drive back to Washington.

F: Thinking he was senator?

R: Believing him to be senator.

F: Where were you when the returns were coming in? Were you back in Marshall?

R: I was in the hotel--I believe it was the Texas State Hotel.

F: In Houston?

R: In Austin. We were in the headquarters there.

F: It must be the Stephen F. Austin.

R: Stephen F. Austin, that's right, it was on Congress.

F: Yes, that's right.

R: The corner across from the Driskill.

F: Right.

R: We left Monday morning and went into New Orleans and spent the second night in Atlanta and were having breakfast somewhere in Atlanta Wednesday morning when we heard the radio report that he had been counted out. So it was a sad last-day journey. But he was wonderful about it. You know, he was--

F: I was going to ask you, did you ever hear any comment out of him on it?

R: Never a complaint; he was a very good loser.

F: There were a lot of "we wuz robbed" adherents around.

first congressional race. And he just didn't think he could have a campaign unless he was there, too. So it was hard on him to stay back.

But everybody came on back and life resumed its pattern of that time, John working for Mr. Johnson and Ray in Mr. Rayburn's office. But John had left Mr. Johnson to go back to Texas and practice law. He hadn't been gone but a few weeks when the campaign came up, but then he rejoined the staff and stayed until the war came.

And he went into uniform; Mr. Johnson went into uniform. We had a party at my house--a little apartment in Buckingham--just before Christmas, and Mr. Johnson came in his lieutenant commander navy uniform. John was there in his lieutenant j.g. [uniform]. Ray was not yet in uniform, but did go in in January. He was assigned to the Navy District Headquarters in New Orleans, and of course I accompanied him there. Then when he went to indoctrination school in Chicago, I went home to Port Arthur.

Then in May, the first news stories about the Women's Army Corps--Auxiliary it was to be then--started, and my father was quite interested in it. It was he who wanted me to go, and judging by the news reports I wasn't too keen on it. I never got excited about it. Finally Papa went to the post office and got the papers, brought them home, and asked me to fill them out to suit him. And Mama said, "I didn't raise my daughter to be a soldier!" But I didn't know what I wanted to do; Mr. Rayburn offered me a chance to work

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in his office, but I didn't want that. I didn't know what I wanted. But I decided that the best thing I could do was to go back to school, and this discipline of meeting classes would help me--

F: Where had you gone earlier, Stephen F. Austin?

R: No, I had gone to--well, I started to CIA [College of Industrial Arts] and graduated from TSCW [Texas State College for Women].

F: Yes. And I haven't gotten up to [calling it] TWU [Texas Woman's University, formerly TSCW and CIA] yet. That's just beyond me.

R: No, I have to think to say that. But I did that. I went back and started in some graduate work, home economics and--

F: At TSCW?

R: At TSCW. And I had a notice to come and take--they called it an AGCT Test; it was just an intelligence test. Well, I went, I took it, and when I got back to school, I said, "Well, that settles that!" Later I got a notice to come for a physical, then even later to come over and appear before a board.

F: Where is "over," in Dallas?

R: In Dallas. According to the newspapers there were around twenty-eight hundred women who were making application in that district, in that recruiting office headquarters.

Some time passed, and I had never gotten excited about it because I never really thought that I'd be pegged to go. But I got a notice that I had been selected to go for further testing, would I be able to go to San Antonio for a statewide examination. I went and talked to my faculty adviser and was advised to go ahead with it.

I went down to San Antonio and went through much the same routine of tests and board appearances, came back, and then I had a telegram saying I had been selected for appointment, would I accept the appointment, I didn't know. So that was when I got in touch with Ray to tell him all about it.

F: It was time to catch him up.

R: He was very excited about it and thought yes, indeed, do it. And I went to visit with his parents at McKinney; they were excited about it. By that time I think Mama had gotten more interested in it, so off I went to Chicago. And I was able to see Ray. He had completed his course for sea duty but had not left; he had his orders for the Hornet. We had a couple of days before we went parting of ways again.

I was in that guinea pig group then in Des Moines. We had six weeks of officer candidate training.

F: Didn't quite know what to do with you at that stage, did they?

R: Oh, no.

F: I suppose they tried it all.

R: The men were borrowing the West Point system, and it was hot, it was hard physically, it was a completely new world. For a woman to see another woman faint and fall out in formation and with glassy eyes, march and step over her and not even stop to help, that was a complete change--everything.

But we graduated and were commissioned the twenty-ninth of August, and I stayed on at Des Moines. With my home economics

background, my assignment was with the cooks' and bakers' school. It was to understudy the director of instruction, director of training.

Then I was assigned to go as cadre for the second WAC training center that was opened in Daytona Beach.

In the meantime the Hornet was sunk. I had heard rumors and I called Congressman Johnson, asked him if he had had any news lately from Ray.

F: He'd gone in the service and come back by then?

R: That's right. This was now December of 1942. He said, yes, he had, and that Ray was in trouble. That was his way of telling me that the ship was in trouble, but he didn't know how bad.

F: The sinking of the Hornet had not been announced officially, you had just picked up the rumor that something wasn't right?

R: Yes. I called him on Thursday night, and they announced it on Saturday. He said, "He's in trouble, but I don't know how bad. I'm in touch with Admiral [L. E.] Denfeld every day. His name so far has not appeared on any list."

But because I was being sent as cadre to open a new training center, and because Ray survived the Hornet's sinking, again we found ourselves with free time together in Texas. Then I went on to Daytona and he came East. He stayed with the Johnsons until he took command of an LSG going to Africa.

In February that next year then I was sent up here to Washington to go to the Adjutant General's School at Fort Washington, and I saw

the Johnsons again there during that period of time. They were wonderful in making their home my home away from home, and it was a place where everybody in uniform met, coming and going.

F: They ran kind of an open house?

G: They ran an open house, and if they were not there, the house was not locked. I went in one Saturday night, came in from school, and found a bedroom that didn't appear to be occupied, went to bed. The next morning, Zephyr [Wright] waked me up with breakfast, served me breakfast in bed. I said, "Zephyr, who's here?" And she said, "Mr. Gene Latimer." He and I were the only two people in that whole house. He was one of Mr. Johnson's boys that he'd brought up from Houston--I'm sure you know that story.

F: No, I don't know that story.

R: Well, you'll have to get Gene to tell you because it's a wonderful one.

F: We haven't seen him yet.

R: When Mr. Johnson came up to be secretary to Mr. [Richard] Kleberg, he brought three students he had been teaching, and Gene was one of them.

I went to Alpine, Texas. The army had taken over the teachers' college there from the school here, and this was to be an administration school to train women to be clerks in the army. We were to get in four hundred a month, graduate four hundred, but they would stay a period of two months. I heard from Mr. Johnson and Mrs. Johnson on occasions while out there.

F: Did he write, or did she do most of the duties?

R: Both.

F: They made a conscious effort to stay in touch?

R: They did, with their boys and their girls. I remember Mr. Ewing Thomason, who is now Judge Thomason, was the congressman from that area. And when he would come out, he'd always stop for a visit and bring me news of Mr. Rayburn and of the Johnsons and other friends.

That school was an active one for ten months. While there I was the WAC staff adviser to the commanding officer. I had lots of duties. I was director of training, was battalion commander; I was fire marshal; I was the intelligence officer. I got a lot of good army training in that.

F: It sounds like a one-man camp, or one-woman.

R: We had thirty-five officers, so everybody had an awful lot of assignments. But it was good training.

When that school closed, I went on a temporary duty assignment of recruiting. Everybody had a time for that. Then I went to Fort Sam Houston. There was a new personnel-type activity there, bringing people in, evaluating them, and getting them overseas as quickly as possible. From that group the commanding general selected a cadre to go with him to Miami, Florida, to establish still another new type of personnel activity. This one was called a redistribution station. We had programs, and there were even films based on what would happen after the first defeat, one down and two to go. When Mussolini was defeated, then these contingency plans went into effect

with, of course, last-minute changes. These redistribution stations were to take part in that--one down, two to go--because it meant moving people and moving them rapidly.

There was another plan, two down and one to go, which meant an even faster, more accelerated movement of people. So I was assistant director of personnel in that Miami activity. On closing of that after V-J Day, I was brought into headquarters here in Washington, wound up my term in the army before separation there.

Then I went back to Texas. Ray and I were divorced that September and I went back to Port Arthur. I spent some months getting ready to open a business. I took over an old house and made it into a dress shop and a tearoom with a catering service for food service outside the house. It was decorated with antiques that were on consignment, so we called it Holiday House. A holiday away from your kitchen, or you could come and get clothes for a holiday. Anyway, we thought the name Holiday House would be fun.

When Mr. Johnson ran for the Senate in 1948, in 1948 they again called on me to take over the direction of the women's activities. I tried to beg off, not because I wasn't interested, I was. But a small business was like a sick baby, it takes all of your attention, and we were so small I didn't see how I could do justice to their interests. But I promised to do whatever I could.

F: Down in your corner.

R: Yes. I worked with Chilton O'Brien who was the district director for the men. We again planned programs, and I worked with Carl White

who had known Mr. Johnson a long time and was a strong political leader in that area. He'd been on the board of the LCRA, he'd been a labor mediator, he had qualifications that gave him strength for Mr. Johnson's campaign, particularly that year with Taft-Hartley just passed.

One of the schemes that was devised--and it was Mr. White's brainchild--was to do a card to everybody, a postcard stressing the importance of retaining the rubber plant there in mid-county. So my little tearoom, with its tables and chairs, came in handy after it was closed at night to be a center for volunteer workers. We could feed them and coffee them and keep things going.

Then Mrs. Johnson came down during that campaign, and we had a coffee for her. So the Holiday House came into play. Mr. Johnson came down, and he came out to the house, and we had a dinner for him after his park appearance--gave him a chance to meet and talk with people for what to do after he left.

F: What did you have, mainly the political leaders of the area that would be interested, or what kind of people did you have?

R: For when he was there?

F: Yes.

R: It wasn't a planned thing.

F: Kind of "you all come"?

R: The people just followed him out. Dorothy Nichols and Horace Busby had accompanied him to Port Arthur, and he came in in a helicopter. The park that he appeared in was right in the heart of town. The

hotel was not one we could take a great deal of pride in, but he returned to the hotel for supper after his appearance. The people that were coming in, like the district manager and the individual county managers and the other people, when I saw what they had offered him for dinner, it was milk and sliced chicken and cold mashed potatoes. Everything was white, and what should have been hot was cold and vice versa. I said, "Please, come out and let me put a steak on the grill and give you some fresh vegetables," and he did. And everybody just followed. It turned in to be quite a houseful. I ran out of steaks.

So I was able to give a little hand in that campaign. But I couldn't travel and I missed out on the strategy sessions and all of that kind of thing.

He called me in I think it was December of 1952 from Houston and said that people were talking to him about becoming the Democratic leader. People were talking to him about becoming the leader in the Senate and that if he did--if he were elected to that leadership post--he would need to enlarge his staff. He was looking for people that he had known a long time and people he knew something about, what they were like and so forth, and if he were elected he would like for me to come join the staff.

F: You were still at Holiday House?

R: No, I had closed it. Mother and Dad were going to be leaving, Papa was retiring, and I had satisfied my curiosity about what it was like to be in business. It was not something I wanted to go on with forever.

So he called again in March after he had been elected and had the shakedown, and I said I'd come up and talk to him. Well, we never talked, but I never left the office to go anywhere. When I got there I went to work and stayed on. Mary Rather was his secretary then. Dorothy Nichols was there; she was working with Walter.

F: Did you have the technical secretarial skills already, or did you develop them?

R: No, I had never had stenographic training. I had taken some shorthand with Mrs. Johnson in 1941. She and Nellie Connally and I enrolled in a little school one summer over in--it must have been Arlington or Clarendon, one of these little communities--and we picked up shorthand. And I had had some typing in--

F: Was that just to have another skill?

R: My father thought everybody ought to know shorthand and typing.

F: Why did Mrs. Johnson do it?

R: Because of being better equipped to get down things that he was saying.

So I had a base to build on, and so I went back to night school.

F: In Port Arthur before you came, or up here?

R: No. When the Congress adjourned in that 1953 session and we went to Austin, I went to night school in Austin and got some more. I would not call myself an expert in stenography, but the work that I had to do didn't demand it; it was useful. I had skills enough to manage to contribute in that area. But I did military case mail; they called--

F: You had kept up your service, then, or did you let that lapse for a while?

R: No, there was no provision at the end of the war for the women to go into a reserve activity. The law was passed later that provided for that, and it was made. . . . But then I had this business that was demanding all my time, and there was not a unit in Port Arthur that I could have belonged to. I didn't go into the reserve until 1956 when this Congressional Command and Operations Group was formed, and I became a charter member by invitation. It was designed primarily for the members of Congress, and we had I think seven senators, twenty-two, I think, members of the House, and the rest were invited from House and Senate offices, both members and committees. There were a couple from the Library of Congress and one or two from the Supreme Court--staff people.

F: Senator Johnson was too busy ever to--

R: Well, he was navy.

F: That's right.

R: He wouldn't have been eligible for this army unit. Senator [Ralph] Yarborough became a member of this group, and Senator Strom Thurmond.

F: Senator [Barry] Goldwater, maybe?

R: No, he was air force.

F: I see, right. You're strictly army.

R: He was very much interested in this unit of ours. And when they formed the 9999th Air Force Unit, they visited with us and they quizzed us, and I'm sure benefitted by--

F: Did Mr. Johnson counsel you on this at all?

R: He was pleased to have me join.

We met at eight-thirty every Tuesday morning, and the members of Congress were very, very faithful in their attendance. It was marvelous to get brought up new and up to the minute at a very high level of briefing. We had the Secretary of Army and we had the chiefs of services within the army and--

F: That gave the Senator also another antenna, didn't it?

R: It did. Because I heard some of the senators in the unit talking--Senator Scoop Jackson, who's recognized as being very knowledgeable in defense, said one day that he could get more information in these units than he could get with the full force of his office behind an inquiry. Well, it was a simple matter of [the fact that] we were all in the family. And there were officers keeping qualified, so it was very good. We had Wernher von Braun, General [James] Gavin, General [John] Medaris, all of these people. We had had briefings throughout the year of 1957 prior to Russia's Sputnik, and I couldn't understand why Secretary [Charles] Wilson was just barely keeping the von Braun unit alive out of his contingency funds, why they couldn't let him go. Well, of course, things changed drastically that year after Sputnik, but it was very helpful to me to have had those briefings. It was a foreign language. You needed a dictionary to know what these people were talking about when you were just thrown in suddenly to the space program.

Well, that's an awful lot about me and coming up to--

F: Well, we're getting a lot of remainder in there. So you've been working for him now since 1953; that is, in our story here.

R: Yes.

F: And you've stayed with him through his Senate years?

R: Yes.

F: Did your duties change as time went by and as he got other assignments himself?

R: Well, you know the expression of the "generalist," and I guess that's what I was, because I did something of nearly everything. I went to Texas with the group when the Congress adjourned in 1953-54-55. Then I asked to stay back. Mother and Dad moved up here, and I asked to stay back and I didn't continue going. He always made it a volunteer thing of moving down. I had filled in for a period doing what the personal secretary would do.

F: Did he like to keep his sort of official family clustered around him most of the time?

R: Well, yes, but Walter didn't go more than, I'd say, half the time.

F: Was that because Walter had his family up here?

R: Yes. Somebody had to stay, and he would have liked always to have had Walter there, but he rested very comfortably knowing that Walter was here.

F: Did he show a real interest in sort of office mechanics, or did he pretty well leave it alone so long as it worked?

R: He was very much interested. He wanted a mail count every day: how many had come in, how many were answered, how many were on individuals' desks, how these were broken down into subject matter.

F: Was that one person's responsibility, to get him that mail count daily?

R: To gather up the information. One person would do the phoning around, and everybody expected it and would be prepared for it.

He would come through the file room and wanted to be sure that the filing was done. Yes, he was interested. The mechanical process of bulk mail which every member of Congress faces--use of mechanical typewriters--he was as meticulous in making certain that those letters were warm and friendly but responsive. You know there was always the danger that they'd be read too quickly, and that they wouldn't be answered as he wanted them answered. So he did take a keen interest. As his responsibilities as [majority] leader grew, of course he could give less time to that kind of thing, but he continued wanting the mail count and looked in on it.

F: Of course at one time he had these several offices because of his various positions within the Senate. It seems to me that would be almost foreordained occasionally [to] have a major foul-up, something get lost somewhere in between. Did that ever happen, or did it work?

R: Not that I know about. Now, when I came up here in 1953, he had his state office in the Old Senate Office Building, and it was to that office he came every day. He would come through the mail file

room, and do the checking on arrival. He would meet with his visitors there in that office. However, he had in the Capitol on the third floor a very small two-room suite that he didn't keep a staff in unless he wanted to use it after the Senate opened in the afternoon, for perhaps lunch, or conferences, or seeing constituents; then someone would go there. Dorothy Nichols and I each had a desk in the outside room of that two-room suite.

As leader he was chairman of the Policy Committee, and the Policy Committee was housed on the third floor of the Capitol. Now, the mechanical typewriters were in a room in the basement of the Senate, and so the person who worked there would come up and get the work, take it down to use the mechanical devices, bring it back up for signature and processing. The Policy Committee--we had a messenger that didn't service anybody but Senator Johnson, and he would make rounds constantly in these offices.

F: I was wondering if someone touched base all the time among the several.

R: This messenger would go. Now there was another room, there was the conference room; it was quite a big room. It had been the Vice President's Office when Mr. [Alben] Barkley was vice president, and that was where Booth Mooney held out. So this messenger of ours--but somebody like Booth would come to the state office; it was the nerve center.

F: Things started there more or less.

R: Yes. Then after Mr. Johnson began spending more time in the Capitol, and eventually wouldn't go there first thing in the mornings, Walter moved into his room in the state office. Mr. Johnson came less to the office then and would receive his visitors in the Capitol office.

F: I presume the volume went up in proportion to his emergence as a national leader?

R: That's right, and the out-of-Texas mail became much heavier--issues mail--because of his leadership role.

It must have been in January of 1954 that that little two-room suite, pleasant as it was, on the front of the Capitol Senate Wing became too small for him.

F: That's about when he changes a little later from minority leader to majority leader, of course. It precedes that slightly, but--

R: Yes, it did. It was in January of 1954 that a two-room suite became available and this was the famous G-14 that old-timers will talk about their experiences going and coming to G-14. This was also a two-room suite. It was nearer to the Policy Committee; it was on the same side of the Capitol Senate Wing as the Policy Committee. Dorothy Nichols and I were in that anteroom with him the balance of 1954 and 1955 and 1956 and until February 1957. Mary Rather had come back; Mary Margaret Wiley, who had come in January, 1954, had become more knowledgeable and experienced. So Dorothy and I were Washington based, and Mary and Mary Margaret were Austin girls and were going with him to Texas at the close of the Congress, and so we changed. Mary and Mary Margaret had been in the state office,

so Dorothy and I went over there and they came over to the Capitol Building.

Then, let's see, Mary Margaret left in 1962--oh, in the meantime, 1958, a two-room suite on the principal floor of the Capitol became available, and that fell my lot to redecorate with Miss Genevieve Hendricks' help and Mrs. Johnson's guidance.

F: Who was she?

R: She was an interior decorator, a professional, that Mrs. Johnson had worked with in their home and had great confidence in.

But it was in the fall of 1958 that that suite became available. That was a chore, but it was a pleasant one--lots of interesting things. That large room that was to be his had been designed as the library for the Senate, and it was one of the most beautifully decorated by the Italian artist Brumidi. The small anteroom had the only Brumidi painting that had any reference to the War Between the States. And this two-room suite had most recently been the Senate District of Columbia Committee hearing room and staff room. It opened on to that very beautiful, very elaborate, Senate reception room that opened on the other side into the marble hall. So it was a most convenient room for a majority leader. Mr. Johnson was able to keep it after he became vice president. That was I think the most beautiful office he ever occupied, and that was the office that--well, in G-14 in 1956 was the year when it became commonplace for people to stop and put their heads in and say, "Well, he just

passed another miracle." But it was also the scene of the planning for the famous 1957 Civil Rights Bill.

Then getting back, Mary Margaret left in May of 1962 to get married, and I went back to assuming the responsibilities of the personal secretary. Mary Margaret had taken over from Mary when Mary left in January of 1958.

F: Why did Mary leave?

R: Family responsibilities in Texas.

F: I almost need a traffic manager in a way--the way over such a long period, to me it has always been fantastic--people come and go, they enter, leave, they never leave, you know.

R: But stay close. This has been true in his pattern.

F: Kind of like he has everybody on a piece of elastic he can pull back at times.

R: Those that he was really close to in college he still has close around him. And it is interesting.

Then from May 1962 until he left the White House, I had that role as the personal secretary.

F: And meanwhile you're keeping up your service commitments?

R: Oh, you asked the question way back on the active duty. I was in that reserve group through 1960. In December of 1960 I made an active duty tour; this happened to be an overseas tour. Senator Thurmond was the senior officer. There were eighteen of us. We went to Scotland, Germany, Greece, and Turkey, Egypt and Spain; and on coming back, Mr. Thurmond wrote Mr. Johnson a letter.

It was a very nice, not a very long letter, but told him about our trip and I think he said he was impressed with me or something of that kind. But at any rate, it was a very nice letter, and it gave Mr. Johnson the idea that as vice president he'd be entitled to military help, that he'd just have me called to active duty. Then he had everybody else screened, and Cliff Carter and I were called to active duty. Then I went on active duty February 1 and have been on active duty since.

F: It worked out rather well, that way you could pile up some credits there.

R: It surely did. When we left the White House, although I had put in twenty-two years and a little better working for the government, my credit with Civil Service was ten years plus, but my credit with the military was fifteen years plus. Neither would give or could give by law to the other, so the investment in the military was too great to give up. So now I'm in the Joint Chiefs of Staff as a special assistant on national security matters. The White House experience has been helpful in this work, and there are times that it's helpful to people around me.

F: I would think it would be invaluable because among other things you'd know what buttons to press at the White House, or what goes and what doesn't, even allowing for the difference in presidents.

R: Yes. And there are still some of the people there now who were there when we were. And like in everything, when you know somebody--my office is in daily touch with somebody in the National Security Council organization, primarily with the secretariat, but it has

been helpful to know those who stayed on in the National Security Council system.

F: Let's go back to the Senate years. When something big like the Civil Rights Act of 1957 came up, or Sputnik, did this make a material difference in your own position?

R: Well, it did with everybody in that it increased everybody's work load.

F: How did you know when you were through at the end of a day? Since you were not bound by any hours, I presume everyone had a general time to show up in the morning, but there's no time for leaving. Am I correct in this assumption?

R: Pretty nearly. Now, when you were with him in his Capitol office, or when he used the Senate office, if you were responsible for being there when he was there--for example, Dorothy and I would take turns, and it was at his suggestion, coming in late to stay late, so the other one could come in early and go home early. Well, coming in early was nine o'clock, and leaving early was six o'clock. Coming in late was ten o'clock, and you stayed as long as he was there, and frequently it was midnight and past.

In the state office it depended more or less on the work load and Walter. The President--or the Senator--wanted the mail answered the day it came in, and it was done if it were possible. It wasn't always possible, because sometimes you couldn't get the answers. Sometimes the sheer volume made it impossible. But you just learned

to gauge it, and people left at different times, depending on their responsibilities and how they looked on them.

F: In something like the civil rights maneuvering there in 1957, did the Senator tend to thrive on the difficulties and the controversies, or did he get irritable or nervous over the possibilities? How did something like this affect him?

R: Well, now that was in 1957 and I was in the state office, so I wasn't living with that development or that crisis as Gerald Seigel, George Reedy, Solis Horwitz [were]. These are the people who would have I believe the best sense of the development of that. He's not an irritable man when there's a big job to do. I remember Mary Rather many years ago said if a door squeaks, it makes him cross and he'll scream out to get the oil can. But if a hurricane blows the house away, he says very quietly, "Come on, let's go to work." And that's the way it is. And I've noticed that. In the buildup toward a decision--and this was particularly true at the White House--you could feel the tension growing; you could feel him being tense, but he was quiet. But you sensed it so that you didn't create any problems by interruptions. You would hold back giving him things or asking him, because you could just see that it was not the time. And when a decision was made, that was the decision; there was never any rehashing or wishing he had done it differently, and there was always a great relaxation.

F: He didn't look back then and second-guess himself?

R: He doesn't cry over spilled milk, and I think this is great. But he certainly never reached a decision without an exhaustive searching for every fact, no matter how obscure, and even appointing a devil's advocate if there were not any opposition points just naturally coming out. Everything he ever tackled, to my knowing, he did exhaustively. Before going into the vice presidency, he had studies done on how the office had been conducted by various and sundries, how the office had grown, exhaustive opinions on the law governing the responsibilities of the vice president. He wanted to know these things. He had them developed; he studied them; he was always very imaginative in creating avenues to explore.

F: These studies on the vice president--is this after he has the nomination, but before he's elected, or after he is elected, but before he takes office?

R: After election, before taking office.

F: Were you involved at all in that indecision on whether he should offer himself for president in 1960?

R: I was not at the convention in 1960. My father had suffered a very severe heart attack that was followed by a stroke, and he was in the hospital at the time of the convention, so I didn't go.

F: Previous to that for a year or so, you know, there had been--obviously, Mr. Kennedy was working hard at it and had been certainly since the mid-fifties. The question was whether Johnson would let his name be entered and let campaign headquarters be [established]--you know, the paraphernalia that goes with a pre-convention push. And he,

to a lot of his supporters, seemed to wait too long before he gave them the green light.

R: Well, I think he did.

F: Was there any feeling in the office force?

R: I don't think we talked about it an awful lot.

F: You stayed busy.

R: We stayed busy. In our office there were people who preferred to wait until Mr. Johnson made a decision, and then that was their decision, rather than being theorists and--

F: They didn't try to anticipate him?

R: --and strategists and make his decision for him. I remember Jim Rowe who was very adamant on the point, "You've got to decide if you're going to do it, because it takes four years." And Jim Rowe made the effort in 1956 to get him to come to his decision, because it would take that much time.

So not being with him in the Capitol, I would not and didn't hear discussions like you did when you were with him in those offices. But in my own personal opinion, I believe that he waited too late to have any chance in Los Angeles.

F: You were back in Texas then when the convention went on?

R: I stayed in Washington since my parents came back in 1955; I haven't gone back and forth.

F: Were you surprised when he, one, was offered, and, two, accepted the vice presidential nomination?

R: Yes, I was. And see, not being there, I had no way of knowing what was going on that day. But on seeing it and hearing it for the first time, I immediately came to the conclusion, well, Mr. Kennedy had to have him, and Mr. Johnson had no choice as Democratic leader. If Mr. Kennedy failed to make it, the Democrats would say, "Well, you could have helped." And if Mr. Kennedy made it without him, he couldn't expect to continue being majority leader. He had no choice.

F: Did it make any difference in staff morale one way or another?

R: Oh, yes. I can't personally remember anybody who was happy about it. And I can't remember anybody who thought anything other than the ticket was upside down. He worked awfully hard, awfully hard.

F: Now what happened to the staff during the campaign? Did you go on pretty much the way you had before while he got other people to help him with the campaigning, or did you just add that on to your duties, or did the office work get neglected or what?

R: No, the people who were with him in the Capitol, like Reedy and Mary Margaret--well, Bill Moyers had come in that year and was in P-38, we called it; that was the downstairs suite office and reception room. Bill was with him in that office in 1960; he traveled with him. Walter, Mildred, Glynn Stegall, and I, Dorothy--we stayed back. And with the Congress out of session, then the character of the mail that comes changes automatically. And with it being a campaign year, there was an awful lot of political mail.

We had an awful lot of volunteers when he was the vice presidential nominee, and through the national committee we had a source

of volunteer help. At one period in the campaign, even with Papa still so desperately sick, I had made schedules for working people twenty-four hours around the clock. And he asked me once if I could get out ten thousand letters in two-weeks time.

F: How many people?

R: He didn't say. He just asked if I could do it.

F: Asked if you'd get it done, I see.

R: And I said, "Well, I'll have to do some pencil pushing and figure it out." Well, we got them out, but he kept adding on.

(Interruption)

F: When you resumed as personal secretary in 1962, he was vice president, of course. Did you feel that he was frustrated as vice president, that he looked back with some fondness on the old Senate days?

R: No, Dr. Frantz, I didn't. I think that Mr. Johnson is an absolute realist. He's a man who likes to build, but once he has finished the building, he, I don't think, is interested in redecorating it. He had made such a brilliant record as the leader of the Senate, but you know that is a man-killing job.

F: Well, I have wondered if he were also sensitive enough to know that when you raise something to a peak you probably can't hold it there.

R: You cannot. And he's not a person who would enjoy replowing the same field without getting any new results. So I think that he had as many years in the leadership of the Senate as he really enjoyed. I don't believe he would have enjoyed continuing there. He's not a man to be content with accomplishment. He has to be achieving.

Now he can get satisfaction out of achieving something small after something big, but he is a realist. He knew what the vice presidency was. I was always provoked with the people who wrote that kind of thing, because I think if you really look at the criticisms of him in that regard, you'll find that they're people who didn't really know him.

F: He accepted his role then as vice president, a subordinate role, and lived with it?

R: Absolutely.

F: Were you ever aware of any frictions between him and President Kennedy?

R: No, I never was. And I never heard him say anything that could remotely be interpreted as any criticism of him.

F: Did you ever get any idea that he thought he might be going to be dumped in 1964? That kind of question is difficult with him since he will always talk on every side of an issue, you know, so that practically everyone talking about his March 31 [1968] speech can remember when he said to them, "You know I'm going to get out of this job." A month before. I mean, he says that on [occasion].

R: He said that after he was re-elected in 1956 with all the firmness and all the sureness, "Now, Bird--" this was at the table at the Ranch--"that was our last campaign. I want you to do everything in Washington these next six years that you've ever wanted to do, because I'm not going to make another race." Now, this March 31 business and this other kind of stuff, there are an awful lot of people who remember what they've read, and then who will in truth and honesty pick

out something that he has said, but he thought he meant that in 1956, but he didn't. And everybody at the table laughed. But if he had chosen not to run, all of us could have said, "Well, we were there when he made his decision." And he was very firm about it.

But he talked about the March 31 thing, but my personal opinion is that he did not come to that decision finally and definitely until March 31. Now Mrs. Johnson, you've probably been told, has notes recorded in her diary of various and sundry times, and various and sundry things. But I believe--now, he calls it holding his options open--I believe he made his decision that day. And it won't make any difference to me what he writes in his book or what he says; my belief is he made his decision that day. I think he thought about it a lot, and I think he wanted not to run. And I think he felt like there were an awful lot of people depending on him to run, and it must have been a dreadful, dreadful situation to be in. He was tired.

He is so content now and he is so happy now. He's busy, and he's doing things.

F: Unpressured things.

R: Yes. But he's just as happy as he can be. Now my opinion is that on that day, making the speech he had worked on through the month of March, he had one thing in his mind, and that was to make Hanoi know that he wanted out of Vietnam, but on only honorable terms and in the only way this being an honorable nation could get out. That was the day it had to be said or not said at all, and I think that it was the day he made his decision.

F: Did you ever see any evidence of his alleged friction with Bobby Kennedy? Did he ever talk about it around the office?

R: Well, I'm not sure that it was around the office, but I saw evidences and was aware of--and I think it was a definite dislike on the part of each for the other.

F: They weren't exactly made for each other.

R: No, indeed, and I think as far as Mr. Johnson is concerned--and I don't think this is prejudice, I don't think it's just being loyal to Mr. Johnson, I think it's the truth--I think Mr. Johnson had every right, every cause to despise that man. I don't know of anything that Mr. Johnson ever did that could in any way have been construed as being planned to be or resulting in being hurtful to Robert Kennedy.

In 1963, when some of the people at the White House and Robert Kennedy wanted new civil rights legislation, President Kennedy wouldn't buy their recommendations until they each in turn talked to the Vice President and evaluated what the Vice President could tell them, and then come and tell him what they thought. And he would then make up his mind. You know Mr. Johnson has a speaker phone, and if you're with him you hear both sides. Ted Sorensen called him; Robert Kennedy called him; he absolutely flooded them with questions: "Have you done this, have you done that, have you talked to this person, have you talked to that person?" And he would say, "Well, Ted," or "Bob, I think you've still got a lot of homework to do." I think they resented that, because he was a skilled--

he was a master technician in legislation. And by the time they had got where they were, they shouldn't have overlooked such obvious failures in readying presenting a bill to Congress.

I think Mr. Johnson is a very sensitive man to people. He senses those who like and dislike him, and he responds. So in addition to having been given cause to dislike Robert, I think that knowing Robert disliked him made him utterly miserable in his company. But I don't know of anything that Mr. Johnson ever did that was designed to hurt. But they were not comfortable together.

F: With a third party present, though, they always kept up a facade of congeniality?

R: Politeness, correctness.

F: Correctness, that's a better word.

R: I shall never forget that last time Robert Kennedy came to the White House, and he and Ted Sorensen sat in the Cabinet Room with the President. I had to go in to take something to the President. I could never be a very good poker player. I can't keep my face from showing something, and I kept my eyes down. But going into the room, I thought--and this is pure prejudice--what a little man you are, and particularly when you're so close to this very big man. Now, that's prejudice, but that's the way I felt. And I'll never forget his walking--he cut across the Rose Garden, and I thought--

F: He being Johnson or Kennedy?

R: Robert Kennedy with Ted Sorensen. And I felt ashamed of myself. He looked like--he had come there in my opinion in arrogance; he wanted

to make peace with the President, because of the President's okay on what--after having made all of the problems of early 1968 that he made, but he looked so little, and all I could think of was he was little. But he looked very sad, looking at him from the back.

F: Did the President ever discuss with you his keeping on all of the Kennedy staff, which in itself was quite remarkable? Presidents usually clean house.

R: Yes. He felt it was necessary for the unity of the country, and this I think was a very high motive, not a personal ambition; I think that he felt it was necessary. I remember Senator Dick Russell sitting with him in that little office, and the President went into the big room for something, and Senator Russell turned to me and said, "Missy, it's a mistake; he ought not to keep them. It's a mistake and I've told him so." And it was obvious the ones who utterly despised not only him, but all of us. They made it very obvious.

F: I'll grant you the disappointment that goes with having been on the mountain top and suddenly falling off, which happened in their case. Is this also, did you feel, a sort of a bias against the area?

R: Yes, I did. I think that they felt superior in all ways. I don't know how many of that staff knew Mr. Johnson's role in helping John Kennedy get as far as he got toward the vice presidency in 1956, but he would have gotten nowhere without Mr. Johnson. The Ambassador--the President's father--knew, and was most effusive in his appreciation, but I don't know of the staff. I believe they were the kind of

people who resented any evidence that Mr. Johnson was more able, and I think maybe they resented his being helpful to Mr. Kennedy in 1956.

F: You don't feel, though, that John Kennedy resented this? [You feel] that he actually appreciated Lyndon Johnson's assets?

R: I really believe he did. I have nothing to base any other opinion on. Now, I wasn't an intimate; I don't know what he might have said in private, but I never thought of him as anything less than an honorable man.

F: Where were you on that fateful day in November of 1963?

R: I was here. We had come back from the Benelux trip and I had brought back as bad a cold as I ever had in my life; it had gone into acute bronchitis. On that day they called me to come back to have more x-rays; they thought I had walking pneumonia. But when the word came, of course, I went immediately--

F: Were you at home or at work or in a hospital or where?

R: Well, I had gone to the Pentagon for x-rays. But when the word came I went immediately back to the office. Then I went and met him at the Executive Office Building that night and worked, I guess it was ten or eleven. Now that period, those few days, I would have to go back over my log and record to refresh my memory on things.

F: Well, I have decided one thing, and that is you've got so much to tell and to offer, I'm going to have another session with you, plus the fact this is pleasant. So if it would suit you, I'd just as soon cut it off now and do it at another time and not wear out a good witness.

R: All right.

F: Good.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

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