INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: HELEN THOMAS

INTERVIEWER: Joe Frantz

PLACE: Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

F: Let's very briefly get you to Washington. Tell me something about when you started.

T: I was born in Winchester, Kentucky, lived [there] most of my growing years, and went to college at Wayne University in Detroit. Detroit is really--I still consider it home even though I came to Washington in World War II, 1942, and got a job as copy girl for the old Washington Daily News. I then went to UP--then United Press--worked as a radio writer for many years, and then started covering several departments--

F: Did you see--?

T: --and then started covering the White House [at the] start of the Kennedy years, January 1961.

F: When did you first come across the Johnsons personally?

T: Personally? In the 1940s.

F: In the 1940s? Him or her?

T: Him. I had interviewed him as a congressman even before he became a senator, and--

F: Was it for a specific issue or just a general feature or what?

T: I think it was--we had a feature called "Names in the News," and I interviewed him.

T: Was this your idea, or was it assigned?

T: No. Well, apparently he was making news--I can't remember the circumstances--but these were people who were spotlighted in a given news event [inaudible].

F: Yes. What were your first impressions?

T: I thought that he was very outgoing, liked people--

F: He was in one of his good moods.

T: Very. He was in one of his better moods, and I've seen them all, I guess. Yes. At that time, he was a congressman. He seemed to be full of himself, just filled with enthusiasms and energies that--you could tell he liked women.

F: Did you get the feeling that he was trying to direct the interview? This is a complaint I've gotten from a lot of press, that they had the feeling that Johnson wanted to write all the copy.

T: I think that later on, we learned that he not only wanted to direct the interview, he did want to write the story, and we do recall the time when he called up one of my colleagues in the middle of a bulletin and said, "You've got it all wrong." At that time, I didn't think of him in those terms.

F: Yes.

T: He was not the powerhouse--

F: It was a pleasant interview, and--

T: [Inaudible]

F: --and I presume that from that time forward he remembered you.

T: I don't know if he actually remembered me. I think I got better acquainted when he was the Senate majority leader, and I had become president of the Women's National Press Club.

F: Yes.

T: It's now the Washington Press Club. And so we entertained and would have the leadership as guests of honor and so forth, and so I got to know him better then. Of course, I had watched his career as a reporter. You could hardly not know who Johnson was.

F: In your period, did they ever give Johnson one of those Gridiron Club sorts of roastings?

T: We knew that he didn't like roastings very well, but we had a congressional dinner in 1960, and at that time--it was in January 1960, and it was, of course, before the convention in L.A., and we had a straw vote.

F: But he wasn't running.

T: No, he *was* running--well, he allegedly wasn't running, but it was between Johnson, Kennedy, Humphrey--I don't know who else was on that.

F: Stevenson was a dark horse--

T: Stevenson, right.

F: And Humphrey as well.

T: But Johnson won the straw poll. Kennedy was very unhappy, of course. It was the congressional dinner gathering; it always marks the return of Congress and the congressmen and senators. But it showed his popularity with members of Congress--

F: And the poll was of congressmen?

T: --that he was the best candidate to be president.

F: Was much made of this?

T: No, not really.

F: He didn't pick it up and run with it?

T: I'm sure it was pleasing to him.

F: Helped the ego, of course.

T: But Kennedy was well launched by then.

F: Going back to that first interview, did you get the feeling you were looking at presidential material, or was this just another interesting congressman?

T: He was an interesting congressman, all right, as far as I was concerned. I couldn't--later on, George Reedy had worked at the United Press, and I would hear his predictions that Johnson would become president. We kind of laughed.

F: Was George pro-Johnson before he joined him--

T: Oh, yes.

F: --or did all that devotion come after?

T: All that came before. I think that's what led him into this path. He was devoted, totally devoted.

F: Did you get the feeling that Johnson tried to capture certain newsmen?

T: I felt that he always wanted to be understood and wanted to be loved. I know that's a *cliché* answer, but I think he really did, and he wanted to be personified, and he wanted to be in the newspapers in the right light, according to his view. So I think that the press was a transmission belt for him and a nemesis.

F: Yes. Did he ever call you to come in on a story, or did you meet him in press conferences, as when you were covering the Senate?

T: After he became a senator? No, I wasn't on the Hill.

F: Did he play favorites in those days like he did later, where he would decide this was the right person and have them in and--

T: I'm sure he did. I know he was kind of hard on photographers and so forth, [he would] kick them out of his office. I'm sure he felt that certain reporters were [inaudible]--

F: I probably ought to ask if--

T: --but I don't think he gave too many scoops, *per se*. He so hoarded information; he didn't like anyone to know, even those who would be in his camp.

F: Right.

T: I don't think he had a [inaudible]--

F: It was hard to get him to admit it was a good day when it was.

T: I don't think he was that generous even with William White and those. I'm sure he leaked stories at times.

F: Yes. And it was a feeling among the press that he had a chance at the Democratic nomination in 1960?

T: No. We knew--I mean, as far as I recollect; I can't speak for all of them. But I didn't think he had a chance at all.

F: You could tell that the Kennedys had done their homework?

T: He had four years of campaigning; he had it locked up.

F: Did you go to Los Angeles?

T: Yes. I did.

F: Where were you when the word came through that Kennedy was naming Johnson?

T: I think I was covering one of the first ladies at the time--

F: Yes.

T: --and ran into Mrs. Johnson in the lobby, and--well, I guess this was the following day where she was taking Lynda and Luci out from the room. It was all over as far as [Lyndon?] was concerned. Well, it went like wildfire. It was kind of a surprise, really, because of the rivalry, and we also knew that LBJ didn't cherish the number-two spot.

F: Right.

T: Later he told the story so many times, about Sam Rayburn urging him not to take it, and the next day urging him to take it, and Johnson asked Rayburn, "What happened in the past twenty-four hours that made you change your mind? Only yesterday you were saying, 'Don't take it under any circumstances!'" And he always quoted Rayburn as saying, "I'm a much wiser man today." And I think in reality, it was politics.

F: Did anyone ever ask Mr. Rayburn about that, that you know?

T: No. I think that Johnson embellished a lot of stories, but I believe that one.

F: What did you do during the campaign?

T: I covered mainly the families in the 1960 campaign.

F: Did you do that swing through the South with the Johnsons?

T: No, I didn't. Like "What did Richard Nixon ever do for Culpepper?" No, I missed that one.

F: Down in Texas, and they may have done this throughout the South, Eunice Shriver, I believe, maybe Pat Lawford came down, and they had teas with Lady Bird in various towns. Did you cover any of those?

T: I went to some teas in the Washington area, but not those.

F: How did that seem to go? Was Lady Bird in charge, or was it a Kennedy operation?

T: I thought it was a Kennedy operation. I don't think there was any question that when the Kennedys were in, they were really in, and Mrs. Johnson--

F: If they were the choreographers, they choreographed.

T: No question about it. I'm sure that Johnson chafed under it. But he had a good relationship with [the?] Kennedy [inaudible]. There was more understanding.

F: Did you ever observe any relationship between the First and Second Ladies, Jackie and Lady Bird?

T: I thought that Mrs. Johnson took a back seat and was very retiring. In fact, when Kennedy died and Mrs. Johnson became the first lady, and she was following Jackie, I think, she said that a big shadow had lifted. I think she always felt that way. On the other hand, she always spoke of how nice Jackie was to her daughters, inviting them to state dinners and so forth.

F: In 1960 after Kennedy was elected, did you become part of the White House press corps at that time, or--?

T: I came here in January, 1961.

F: Were you assigned to the First Lady, or was--?

T: I was doing a lot of Jackie, but I was really assigned to UP as the third person on the staff.

F: Did there develop a kind of White House ladies' press corps, or did the editors in their wisdom decide that you needed a woman to deal with a woman, or how did that come about? Why wasn't it mixed?

T: I think that there has been a tendency to assign women to cover women, if they covered first ladies.

F: I can see certain conveniences in it, but otherwise, isn't it chauvinism?

T: Jackie and families became of great interest, but I was covering Kennedy just as much, at Camp David and covering him here every day, but I was also handling all the women's stories. But not completely, because the men found Jackie was fascinating too, to write about, and Caroline and--

F: Did you see much of Johnson during those vice-presidential years?

T: I used to go to see a good friend of Liz Carpenter's, and we used to--I went to the Ranch for three days when he entertained about thirty delegates from the UN, and barbecued; a whole weekend. And I was invited to The Elms for parties, so I saw him quite a bit.

F: When you went to The Elms did you get a feeling of an official place, or was it pretty homey?

T: No, I wouldn't call it homey. It was more on the formal side but beautifully done, and I think it was a gorgeous setting. I think the Johnsons felt at home there because they could entertain in a very beautiful way, and they liked to entertain, so I think--they seemed to belong there. The colors were great and so forth, but it was much more formal, a Perle Mesta-type of--

F: Yes. Where were you on the assassination day?

T: I was in Washington, and I was preparing to leave on a vacation. I was in a restaurant when I heard it, and--

F: There blew another vacation, hm?

T: --that's right--dropped everything and then I was sent to Andrews Air Force Base to leave for Dallas, and so--

F: So you--

T: But in the cabin, I heard on the radio that he was dead, and we practically knew it--I had rushed to the office and then everything [pointed] in that direction, but they still said, "Go pack, and go to Dallas." But by the time I got to the airport, it was all over.

F: How about the story from the Dallas standpoint from Chuck Roberts and others, and from the Washington standpoint--you know, they pooled things in Dallas, so that nobody would get a clear newsbreak on anything, and all the pictures [inaudible], did this end of the press procedure work slightly well, or was it--?

T: [Inaudible] Do you mean during the funeral?

F: Yes, I mean during those four days.

T: Well--

(Interruption)

F: We were talking there about Johnson's vice-presidential years, and--

T: I think he felt very frustrated. Everyone says that, but I think it's quite true, and he felt he wasn't getting enough exposure or recognition.

F: Did you get any feeling--or you never had any feeling that Kennedy was cutting him down, but it was just the office, really?

T: I think that he felt that he was being pushed around by the Kennedy people.

F: Yes. Do you think he was?

T: I think that there certainly was some movement to--

F: They kind of disdained him when he--

T: But all vice presidents have felt that way one way or another. [Inaudible].

F: It inheres in the office.

T: Inherent. Look what's happened in the past--well, since the FDR era we can really chronicle it, and probably even long before that, throughout our history. Vice presidents have not exactly been put on pedestals, and they've always chafed under the--

F: I've been watching Mondale on that with some interest to see if maybe he'll break the mold, but I don't know. Going back to those tragic four days, what did you do?

T: I covered the state funeral; I covered the church service; I was everywhere. I covered Pennsylvania Avenue. I covered the--

F: Did you sleep any? Not much?

T: Nobody did; no reporter did.

F: Did you go to the reception for the visiting dignitaries?

T: Yes.

F: How did that seem to go?

T: I thought that Jackie was really handling everything and coping with the situation in a very grand way, and I think that she rose to the occasion.

F: Was there a feeling that Johnson was in too big a hurry to taste power? Did he show a proper reluctance, or what?

T: Well, he is a take-charge man, there's no question. I didn't feel that there was any drive--it was a shock when I first walked into the Oval Office and saw him sitting in the rocking chair, because you are hit with this suddenness of--

F: Yes. I felt that. Every time there is a change in the administration, you feel like, "Who are these people?" And [yet] you've had several months to get used to it. This way, it's just overnight.

T: That's true, but I think in a way it's always overnight.

F: Yes.

T: At the same time, they start moving the furniture out of the Oval Office on the day of the assassination really, and so you have this whole sense of how quickly power is transferred.

F: Under Johnson, did you tend to stay with Lady Bird, or did you pretty well cover the whole--

T: I covered the whole thing, both sides. But I must say that I enjoyed covering Mrs. Johnson very much, because of the dynamic leadership of Liz Carpenter. Nobody can ever match her.

F: Liz is a case unto herself, but--

T: And the trips that Mrs. Johnson took and so forth, that I--

F: Which trips did you take? I know you took one to Big Bend, and--

T: I took practically all of them. I did not go to one of the Virginia trips, but most of them I took.

F: Yes. Did you go on that whistle-stop of hers, that Dixie tour? How did that seem to work?

T: I thought that she was absolutely tremendous and effective [?], her stamina and her fighting spirit.

F: At this time, the South is fairly discontented with its semi-southerner in the White House and is feeling pretty bitter about the whole thing. Did you feel that that was directed at Mrs. Johnson, as opposed to him?

T: I thought it was pretty bitter medicine she had to take on that, the Goldwater signs, and some of them [proclaiming], "Lady Bird's a blackbird!" and so forth. And when we went through Charleston, the blinds were pulled down, and it was certainly not the heralding of America's First Lady. I think that there were moments that were very trying.

F: Did she seem to take it in stride, or did it upset her?

T: I wouldn't say "in stride." I think she took it beautifully, but I think that she--

F: There is no stride for that sort of thing.

T: She handled it beautifully, and she didn't crack at all, and I thought that she was a total lady overall, in the sense of really dealing with the situation in a very, very forthright way, a very heroic way.

F: Was it your feeling that she made votes for him or that she just failed to lose them?

T: No, I thought that she won him a lot of admiration throughout the South and [inaudible]--

F: Largely on courage and gentility.

T: That's right, I think, and they knew that she was one of their own, nevertheless. She had the accent and the drawl and so forth.

F: Did you ever feel any physical threat for her, or did you feel like it was mainly just bad grimaces?

T: I didn't feel anything physical, but the hostility and the animosity in the atmosphere was so unpleasant, and it was worrisome [inaudible]--

F: Did it get worse as you went deeper, or was it pretty much the same throughout?

T: I think as we went deeper it became [inaudible]--

F: I gather, by the time you got to New Orleans, it was something of a triumph, wasn't it?

T: It was. They had a triumphal reunion; the whole thing was like a Hollywood ending.

F: Did you get the feeling that it was staged that way or that Johnson was just legitimately busy enough, and this seemed one place to show up?

T: I had the feeling that it was staged, but it still worked out beautifully. It was [inaudible]--

F: It was well staged, in other words.

T: It was spectacular, but at the same time, it was terrific. Everything is staged in a campaign, one way or another.

F: Could you feel the crowd's response?

T: This is when he gave his "Nigger, Nigger, Nigger" speech, and I thought that it took a lot of courage in that setting to give that speech, and I thought he was showing a heck of a lot of guts.

F: Yes.

T: But there was no question that there was a tremendous enthusiasm for him, despite all.

F: Did you get any instances of local dignitaries--I'm sure that if I were the mayor of some place in Alabama, I'd have had second thoughts on whether I ought to get aboard or be seen on the platform, just from the standpoint of my local constituency.

T: I couldn't pinpoint it. I know that Wallace got on Mrs. Johnson's train and sent flowers and so forth. All these things were noted. There was a certain graciousness, despite all.

F: Do you have any clues as to whether Wallace coming aboard was negotiated or whether it was his own idea?

T: We didn't know, and then there was another--the governor of--was it Mississippi? I think it was. I don't really know. I think for sure there was a lot going on that we didn't know, but each thing became a major news story, everything that was happening, and--

F: It wasn't just ladies day at the ballpark?

T: There was no question that Mrs. Johnson was in command. Hale Boggs was on board at times, and a South Carolina senat--no--congressman, who was big on the Armed Services--

F: Mendel Rivers.

T: Tremendous. The speeches they gave in her behalf are memorable.

F: It must have been a real sort of a floating population.

T: Nobody can ever forget the whistle-stop.

F: What kind of press facilities did you have? Or did you have to get off in each town and--?

T: Well, yes. We had a lot of our people along the route who could take the copy, and we'd have to run to telephones at different stops and also [inaudible].

F: Yes. Did anyone ever try to sabotage you?

T: Not that I know. If--

F: The local press sort of a--

T: --they did, I honestly do not know. You mean sabotage the train?

F: No, sabotage getting the news out; cut lines and that sort of thing.

T: No. I mean, if they did, I wasn't aware of it. We got our stories out.

F: Did you feel any hostility toward you as a newswoman, or did they seem to understand your professional position?

T: It was just hostility to Mrs. Johnson along the route, and I'm sure the press was a part of it because the press has always been a part--in a way it becomes a part of a campaign in a sense, and I think the Goldwater fans were very--they were angry.

F: Yes. Did you get in on these peripatetic press conferences that Johnson used to hold up and down the White House?

T: Yes.

F: He's got a long stride naturally. Did he try to adjust his pace to the shorter people?

T: No. He was trying to [inaudible]--

F: You ran and kept up, huh?

T: Yes. Right.

F: Did you get the feeling he quit that because it was not practical, because the reporters didn't like it, or because he began to get suspicious of--or disenchanted, I guess, would be a better word?

T: I felt that he did it in a--he first called his dogs, and then he called us, and I felt that that was all [inaudible].

F: He kind of put you all in the--

T: [Inaudible] And then he'd talk in a whisper, which was deliberately sadistic, and then he'd put everything either on background or off the record, which left everybody totally confused. It was total chaos. And people were bumping their heads into light poles. And the most sadistic part was toward George Reedy, who couldn't walk. And so the whole thing was, I thought, an exercise in showing us who was boss, and in the end, I

thought it didn't win him any friends in the press, and it was a lousy way to do the nation's business.

F: Did he ever chew you out on a story?

T: I've been in the doghouse. I've been--

F: Did you know why?

T: Oh, yes, when I did stories on Luci mostly, when Luci was engaged. I wrote the story that she was engaged, and he flipped because he found out about it on the teletype, when I wrote the story, at the Ranch. He was recovering from gall bladder surgery. And I wrote that Luci and Pat were flying to Texas to tell him that they were engaged, and he--

F: He didn't like the news broken?

T: The whole family put me in the deep freeze for many weeks after that. Oh, yes. You always got the message. And there were other times when he didn't exactly like what I'd written. And he was always tuned in to what we were thinking and what we were saying.

T: But you never got those midnight calls, or post-midnight calls?

T: Not from him, no. No. But he was zeroed in on what we were saying in the press room. He always wanted to know; he was full of curiosity, and--

F: You also never got the feeling that he didn't know what you were doing?

T: I always had the feeling that he always--

F: Even though I think it's quite possible to think, "He doesn't even know I'm a reporter," or something--

T: Oh, he knew. He had everybody pinpointed. He knew that his war policy was not exactly beloved, and I think he knew many, many things and was constantly trying to explain himself.

F: I would guess that the total press and Capitol press, they would have been against his war policy. Was he defensive with them about it, or was he aggressive, kind of a "By God, I'm right, and you're wrong!"

T: No. He was constantly beseeching for understanding. "This is what all these Rhodes scholars and Harvard boys told him he could do, and this is . . ." and so forth, and when he was deceptive on the policy, he tried to cover it up with big, grandiose--

F: Is he trying to cast the blame on these college boys, or is he himself doing a kind of little public analysis on himself: "How did I get myself into this thing?"

T: I don't think he ever admitted publicly that he was wrong, his policy was wrong, but I think the repudiation of reelection or running for reelection was in itself an admission that he'd come to the end of the line when he knew that he could no longer really govern, when he could not end the war, he thought that he had been deceived by the CIA reports, by Tet, by everything that happened, and when Westmoreland asked for 240,000 more troops and so forth, that was it. He knew that he couldn't [inaudible]--well, when you can only go to military bases, and your credibility is zilch, and so forth, I think he realized how bad things were. He once told General Haig, after he was out of office, that he felt that TV had really killed him because it was bringing the Vietnam War into every living room every day at this time of rising tensions.

F: I think TV may have killed the war, in a sense.

G: I think that he might have had some soul-searching toward the end. I think always when he went into Vietnam and so forth he justified it totally, and he used the whole premise that if you don't fight aggression--he was thinking in terms of World War II--and that you don't appease, and you don't do [inaudible] these commitments are made, and we're going to win, and he never wanted to lose a war, be the first president to, and neither did Nixon.

F: There is a lot of writing about his having a Texas-Alamo complex. I never was sure that that was quite just. There may be a germ of truth in it, but I had a feeling that this could have happened if he'd come from North Dakota.

T: I never thought of him as a belligerent or as liking war. If anything, I think he had suffered, and saw it more painfully than any president. He did really sort of empathize with suffering in a way, and I don't think that Nixon did.

F: I often thought he was the luckiest man in the world that neither one of his sons-in-law got it. They would have turned on him there, I think, but good.

Did you cover the Tonkin Gulf story?

T: Only from the standpoint of being here when he asked for the resolution. I think there was some sense of panic, but he wanted that *carte blanche*, there was no question about it. But I also covered him during the campaign when he promised not to send American boys to do what the Asian boys failed to do.

F: You think that was just campaign rhetoric, or do you think he was sincere at the time?

T: I think there was enough evidence on his desk to show that he knew there was a possibility [inaudible]--

F: He knew it would be escalated. I've always felt a certain sympathy for Goldwater on that. I thought he was out-jockeyed.

T: I think that LBJ knew that he couldn't win an election if he--

F: Yes. Not as the war candidate.

T: --and he did portray his opponent as the--"Whose finger do you want on the button?" But Goldwater asked for it because he was talking in those terms.

F: Yes, being quite explicit. How did you get along with the staff of Lyndon Johnson? You've seen several of them now, and does it compare rather well with the other staffs?

T: I don't have too much admiration for his press secretaries. I liked Tom Johnson very much, but the others, I felt, fell into a pattern and came under his spell. I don't think that they had liked Joe Laitin very much. Joe Laitin was a deputy.

F: Yes.

T: And I don't think that--I think they let him run the show, and as a result his credibility came into question.

F: Was Johnson's staff harder or easier or about average for getting information out of?

T: They were scared, and when you're scared, you can't get much information. They needed to know that [inaudible]--

F: I've heard Johnson tell any number of them, "I didn't bring you up here to get your name in the paper."

T: Who wants to take that on? And they knew that he could hardly bear for them to be quoted, and I think that some of his [inaudible] people really understood him and loved him despite all, or they weren't about to stick their necks out way out in front or to give you interviews and so forth. He wanted to know everything that was going on. He ran the White House. And he ran everyone with it. He had a total knowledge--or thought he had total knowledge--of what was going on.

F: Did he tend to place restrictions on Luci and Lynda and their accessibility to the press?

T: He was a very permissible father, and I think he loved them very much, and I think they could do no wrong in his eyes.

F: Somebody might wrong them.

T: And they loved him. They loved him very much. I mean, it was a great relationship. You could see that he really--he knew--and they just felt so much for him.

F: Did you see the gall bladder scar?

T: I wasn't in on that.

F: You got to miss that?

T: No. I wasn't. I didn't interpret it as gross or boorish. I thought, "That's LBJ." [Inaudible]

F: All of us have an uncle like that--somewhere.

T: Well, in a sense, it was really--he's a very realistic man.

F: Did he ever talk to you about personal things, either about him or about you?

T: I think he confided to everybody if something was bothering him. At the same time, he put it all off the record, and that meant that he would tell you things and you'd feel drawn into the circle. But mostly he kept wanting to be understood, or he wanted his explanation to be understood, but you never quite believed everything, because--I think he had a very difficult time, really, separating the truth from what he wanted it to be.

F: In other words, when he served a message, he served himself first.

T: That's right, and it was constant, "Don't you see that he is so well-meant, that he is so loving, and he is so . . . ?" And this whole image of himself was constantly getting in the way of what was really happening.

F: Did you have a feeling that being a woman gave you any advantage?

T: I think he liked women, and I think he felt--he used to tell us all that we were more sympathetic than the men. He'd say, "The newspaperwomen are better than the men." Well, we weren't really, but what he felt was that he could convey better [to them], and he felt more at home with them. I think his strong mother, and I really think that having three women in his family, and all those things [had the result] that he felt we were more understanding.

F: Given the natural kind of adversary relationship between the press and the president, do you think he got treated better, worse, or the same as other presidents? Every president comes to think he's abused.

T: He had a big honeymoon. He had a long one, and they--the boards were swept clean of all the past and what he had been as Senate majority leader, and what he had been--when he took over, he had the nation with him, a sorrowing nation. He could have asked for anything, asked for the moon and got it from Congress, and everything else. He rode [?] the press, so I feel that he got a longer honeymoon than most presidents. But the inevitable came, because he began to assert himself, his own personality more and more,

and he's a very, very powerful type. I think that [inaudible]. He monogrammed our whole society. It was his White House; it was his government; it was his [inaudible]--

F: It was his helicopter.

T: --and there was room for no one else. And these things are just symbols. I think that once the press got onto that--but basically, it was his credibility [inaudible], and we realized that it was very difficult to separate [inaudible].

F: Now, in a sense, you are a sectionalist girl, with a Kentucky birth and a Detroit upbringing. Did he ever try to make some sort of relationship between you and him because of the Kentucky--?

T: He felt a certain inferiority when he was vice president. He felt that the Bostonians were looking down on the Austinites and the Texans, so--

F: You think they were?

T: I think there was a certain amount of ridiculing of six-foot-six Texans, bigger than life and so forth, and all the clichés.

F: I felt very strongly that the nicest thing about his no longer being president was it would get the Texans out of the limelight for a while.

T: In the corner, more or less.

F: Yes.

T: Some withdrawal [inaudible] in a grandiose way.

On the other hand, I thought he had a lot of compassion; if he really felt sorry for you, he really felt sorry for you and really would move the mountain to do things for people.

F: Did--?

T: He had a lot of personalized relationships which--and he had more feeling in many ways than many presidents. So--

F: In some way, I think he felt a disappointment that the blacks were not more grateful. He wanted everybody to be grateful, but I think he understood maybe why they weren't because of their waiting so long. Did you ever see any evidence of that, hear him complain one way or another? "Here they've got the vote; they've got this, and they don't like me."

T: I never heard him complain against the blacks. No. I think that he had a lot of sympathy, and he knows what [inaudible] experience of driving across the [inaudible]. He told that at least 150 times.

F: Yes. The nice thing about Johnson's stories, he told them so many times you remembered them.

T: But he personalized with one person. He personalized with one person; then he could make it into a reality, and that's when--I think the war began to come home to him when Merriman Smith's son died. Then he began to feel around it [?], and--

F: People he knew--

T: --[inaudible] in a personal way, right. Then it wasn't ten thousand miles away. It was something very [inaudible].

F: Kind of a "Good Lord, if I knew the way home, I'd go."

T: [Inaudible] with blacks I think he was very sincere and that he understood them. Of course he was the master of compromise, too. The main thing was, he wanted to win.

F: Did he--?

T: [Inaudible] I felt that he had--in order to win on the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, they made a lot of compromises, and on the earlier Civil Rights Bill during the Eisenhower [inaudible].

F: Do you think that most of the civil rights activists understood his compromises as assistance for them, or do you think that they were basically purists who thought you don't give an inch? In other words, is it possible--?

T: I think in the beginning they thought of him as a big compromiser, and I think that the first part was when he was Senate majority leader, and he made big compromises, but he--

F: Yes. He did in 1957. Right.

T: [Inaudible]

F: The 1957 Act, yes.

T: --and it was his compromise, and he kept patting himself on the back for that, and I think that he didn't really have the--at the same time, [inaudible]--

F: It didn't go down very well. Yes.

T: Then I think his behavior was very good during the marches, and so--he began to really realize what the federal government's role was. Hesitant as he might be, I think he moved affirmatively when it was necessary to move, and when Martin Luther King died, and then the instances when he really, I thought, showed that he understood that it was one country, and--

F: Do you have any favorite memories of those years? They were active ones. They kind of cascade in a way, but--

T: I think that the Vietnam years were very bitter. He became more and more bitter because he could see that he was getting in deeper and deeper, and that by this time that there was no getting--and they began to shut the doors and so forth. There was a tremendous longing for us to cover him at the Ranch, or going to church, or seeing him in his own ambience, hilarious moments and poignant moments and so forth. He was a total human being, and I guess you always went away kind of shaking your head and saying, "Is this for real?"

But I thought that he was--at their parties, they were really gracious. He tried to dance with every woman who came to the White House, because he knew that she would like to go home and tell the folks, "I danced with the President!" It became an absolute

feat. One year I think he danced with every woman, bless his heart, and he made it a solid commitment. He knew that people liked the little mementos, [inaudible]. I think he felt that everything he was doing was a part of history, and the constant sense that he was now involved in history, and he had the awe--about a week or two after he had become president, he said, "There've only been"--what was he, the thirty-sixth?

F: Thirty-sixth.

T: "There have only been thirty-six of us," and he was looking out across the Washington Monument [inaudible] in the upstairs quarters where you can look out on the balcony, and you just had the sense that he was really fixing his--

F: One of the world's exclusive clubs, yes.

T: That's right.

He used to worry about the foreman out at the Ranch. I remember thinking that when his days were done as the president, who was he going to boss around?

F: Now he fooled us there. We thought he was going to come back and have about three days of rest and then get up one morning and say, "Okay. Now then, who can I kick today?" and start in. But he never really got into that too much. He seemed to have left it all behind.

T: He loved power and he loved to use power, and I think the [inaudible].

F: One final thing. You made, you said, all but one, probably, of Lady Bird's trips. Did you have the feeling that they accomplished something?

T: Maybe I [inaudible]--

F: Well, but they [inaudible]--

T: All you've got to do is to look at Washington today. She made the country move, and I think that the legacy of her sense--of her commitment--the heritage, the beauty of our land, this land we love, I think she made us aware of it. Oh, I think that her contribution was lasting, really.

F: I was down on the Eastern Shore at some little woebegone place the last couple of years. There was a patch about the size of where we're sitting in the middle of town. It's a farmers' little community where they sold fishing tackle and that sort of thing. That was about it--the inevitable bar--but there was a whole patch of geraniums, and I rather had the feeling that if it hadn't been for her, there would have been discarded beer cans just sitting out there in that dust and weeds, but--

T: Oh, I think that she's tremendous. All over this country, this whole sense of beauty.

F: Helen, I sure do thank you for this.

T: I don't think I added anything to the record.

F: [Inaudible]

T: I don't have any Doris Kearns--

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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