

INTERVIEWEE: MRS. ALBERT (LERA) THOMAS

Interviewer: David G. McComb

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M: To sketch in the background of your husband, according to my data he was born in Nacogdoches County in 1898; educated at Rice, he got an A.B. degree from Rice in 1920; and got a law degree from Texas in 1926; and then the following year, 1927, he was admitted to the Texas, Bar. From 1927 to 1930 he worked as a County Attorney in Nacogdoches and then 1930-1936 he worked as an Assistant United States Attorney. In 1936 he moved to Houston. Is that right?

T: We moved to Houston in 1930 when he was a federal District Attorney.

M: So when he was the District Attorney you were in Houston then?

T: Oh, yes, we had to come down and establish residence.

M: And then starting in 1936 and going to 1966, he was a member of the House of Representatives. Is that correct?

T: Yes.

M: And representing the 8<sup>th</sup> Texas district which included the Houston area. I also have here that he married in 1922--I don't know your maiden name--

T: Lera.

M: What was your last name?

T: Millard.

M: Lera Millard. You were from Nacogdoches?

T: Oh, yes.

M: Where did you go to school?

T: Well, I graduated from Nacogdoches High School and then I went to Brenau College in Gainesville, Georgia, for two years and then went to the University of Alabama. The mid-senior year I left to be married.

M: Then I assume that you shared all of his life after this through Congress and--

T: Yes. [two children, Ann Thomas Lasater and Lera Thomas]

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M: Good. Let me ask you about his political career. He first ran for Congress in 1936.

T: Yes.

M: And he ran against Oscar Holcombe. That must have been a pretty tough race because Holcombe was a popular man, was he not?

T: Yes, and he had been Mayor for twelve years. But the strange thing about it was, Albert Thomas was not known and he had to do it the hard way. He had to resign from the office of Assistant Federal District Attorney, and no one thought he could win. We had no money and he had to do it on his own personal contact. He walked the streets from morning until night and I would go in a different direction. I did not make political speeches, but I circulated with people and it got to be quite a joke, because just to say "This is Mrs. Thomas" didn't mean anything. Therefore, we had to come out with Mrs. Albert Thomas. One of the policeman here I knew very well, because with my friends we would sometime be able to find a parking place downtown before the city grew so large, and he recognized me and knew I was Mrs. Thomas. So one afternoon I had been out campaigning--seeing people--and I drove up and very hurriedly parked, and I said,

"Oh, may I please park here just a few minutes?"

And he said, "Yes, if you will do something for me. Will you vote for our Mayor Holcombe?"

I said, "Oh, no, don't you know who I am?"

And he said, "Yes, Mrs. Thomas."

I said, "Yes, but I'm Mrs. Albert Thomas."

And that has gotten to be quite something; he's still with the police force here, and he's Captain Tom Sawyer.

M: Does he remember that?

T: Oh, yes, he remembers it quite well.

M: Did he let you park anyway?

T: Oh, yes, he couldn't refuse me then.

M: Do you remember any of the issues of the campaign?

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T: Oh, everything was an issue. One of the friendly jokes the Mayor and Albert had after the campaign was over--and we were very good friends and have been with the Holcombe family--Mayor Holcombe was making a speech and he said,

"Why would you elect a newcomer to Congress? I know all the problems of Harris County and certainly the city of Houston; why would you elect a newcomer?"

Well, my husband told him after that he made the best campaign speech for him that he could possibly have made because Houston is made up of newcomers, and especially East Texans resented that very much. So that sort of brought them together and they voted.

M: Do you think that was the key to his successful victory?

T: Well, it meant one thing. It meant that the newcomers were sympathetic with him and thought he would work very hard and certainly that he would be sensitive to the growth of Houston. Anyway, East Texans just stick together.

M: Did your husband support Franklin Roosevelt at that time?

T: Oh, yes.

M: Was that a problem in the campaign at all?

T: No. I don't recall it as being a political issue. Those days people went out for individuals more than for support of--I don't know how to say it but we ran our own race.

M: Was it based more then on the personality of the candidates?

T: That's right, and the man.

M: And the man, rather than national issues?

T: Yes. And of course we had not gotten into this deep depression at that time. Everyone was having a hard time, but it was after that we went--the first year, because when we first started out in politics I was opposed to it. Finally Albert said to me,

"Well, just think, you'll be there six months and home six months."

Well, that sounded better so I went on that assumption that that would be carried out. Well, it was everything else but that. It lasted the first year all right, but after that it almost was a full-time job. Because we'd be called back or we would just stay on in session.

M: You didn't want to go into politics?

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- T: No. I grew up in East Texas politics, but there it was different. Because his family had always lived there, grandfathers on both sides, and everyone knew me, everyone knew his family, they knew my family, and I worked in a bank while he was at the University finishing getting his law degree. As the people would come in I could ask them if they were going to vote for us, and I knew--as I said East Texas people--you know whether they're going to vote for you. They'll tell you.
- M: What persuaded your husband to make the race? Why did he want to go into politics?
- T: Well, we had just lost our only child [1934], a little boy [Jim Nelson Thomas], and I think the idea was just to throw ourselves completely away from everything that we had done or where we lived or anything like that. I think that was one of the things that caused him to do it. He always liked people, and of course he liked the political--being the County Attorney. But he would have made a tremendous trial lawyer.
- M: But he wanted to break away, and change of life and--
- T: I think that. And of course he never dreamed that we'd stay even that length of time--two to four years. To get the experience and then he would come back here and practice law.
- M: He must have enjoyed the political life then, once he got into it.
- T: Well, it's a challenge to you and, of course, I think the people were so kind to us that he never had a real hard political race. That probably would have changed things very much. But as I said, the people of Harris County were wonderful to us and had confidence in him; therefore, he was returned each year with no great opposition.
- M: In Congress he served on a number of committees, is that right?
- T: Oh, yes. As all freshmen members of Congress do, he was on a small committee--I think it was Labor. Of course that's not very small considering-- But just at that time it was not prominent as it is now. And then he went on from that to the Navy, I think it was, and then the Appropriations.
- M: Is it correct that the appointment to the Appropriations Committee was the most important?
- T: Yes, it was, and that was our first sort of politics within politics.
- M: What do you mean by that?
- T: Well, President Johnson wanted it also.
- M: I see. When was this appointment made? Was this after Johnson was President?
- T: Oh, no. That was when he was a member in the House.

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M: That would be back in the 1940's?

T: Oh, yes, and he wanted to be so--. You see, Albert had a bit of seniority over him, we came in on the regular election, and the then Congressman Johnson came in on a special election. As time went on, when there became a vacancy on the Appropriations Committee and it could be given to a Texas member, my husband had the idea that he would like to be a member of the Appropriation--and so did the then Congressman Johnson.

So, it had to be decided by the Texas members. Had to vote. So, it was rather a ticklish situation to be in. And President Roosevelt decided that he would like to have Congressman Johnson also. So, that made it doubly hard. But I will say I think the Texas members were fair and certainly they had no feeling of prejudice against either one. But they felt that my husband should be given the chance. President Johnson had said--he came back to Texas when he was Senator--and he told this story in his speech to my husband's dinner. And he said how fortunate it had been that Albert had gotten the appointment to be a member of the Appropriations Committee because he stayed on and got the seniority in the Committee; whereas he [Johnson] then went to the Senate and therefore he could not have served as well as Albert did. So he told the story himself at this dinner. It hasn't been told too many times, but of course it was a fact and all the Texas members knew that.

M: As a Congressman Mr. Thomas did a great deal for the Houston area, apparently.

T: I think he did. He was accused of that.

M: Doing too much.

T: Doing too much for them. [Houston and Harris County]

M: But he helped in the deepening and the widening of the ship channels, did he not?

T: Yes.

M: And didn't he have something to do with the post office construction here?

T: Yes, he did. Of course, all this money came under federal appropriations. It wasn't something that was just given them; it was something very badly needed. He never was unreasonable about what he asked for and therefore the people understood him. They knew he was honest about it; that he was getting it for a city that was becoming the most successful in the growth of the city; and, therefore, they had to expand in every way.

M: Is it true that he helped get the appropriations for the federal building that was built here?

T: Oh, yes.

M: It seems to me that he had something to do with the Federal Aid to Airport Act.

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T: Oh, yes, he did.

M: Which helped the Houston area.

T: The first WPA project that was built under Roosevelt is down here on the Allen Parkway still.

M: What is this?

T: It's the slum area. It was all cleared and now I guess it's the most expensive property it could possibly be and it's owned by the government. Have you ever noticed as you've driven along?

M: Yes. Was that a project just to clear the land on the bayou?

T: No, it wasn't to clear the land. It was a very bad slum area in there and people were very badly in need of homes in those days. And then people needed jobs. So therefore they served all these different purposes, and that was the first slum clearance and public housing--

M: That must be the San Felipe Courts that you're talking about.

T: Yes. It covers a terrific-- And, of course, that property is just invaluable now.

M: That's the property down around the Jefferson Davis Hospital in that area?

T: Yes.

M: Your husband was in on that, too?

T: Oh, yes, that was his first project on that. That was 'way back during the Roosevelt Administration when WPA came into existence.

M: I think one of the most famous projects that your husband was in on was the placing of the Manned Spacecraft Center.

T: I think he gave about five years of his life on that, because he was so afraid that he wouldn't get it. It was a terrific thing because there were so many people that were trying to influence President Kennedy. And, of course, President Kennedy had a terrific decision to make even against his own state, because MIT wanted it, you see, and California, where they had the biggest electoral vote of any state almost. So he certainly did favor my husband and all of Texas, of course, especially Houston.

M: What kind of work did Mr. Thomas have to do to persuade the officials to place the Center here?

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T: Well, I don't know that there was anything other than what was actually here. If anyone could have seen the area that was selected, you couldn't believe it possible as you see it now.

M: The land was barren then?

T: Yes. And the Nassau Bay residential area just across from the land was a ranch, it was the Raymond Pearson Ranch. And this other land was just there.

M: Was that land owned by Humble Oil?

T: Yes, I think part of it was and different people--I'm not familiar with who owned all of it at the time, but I knew that Humble did and they made it possible that they could purchase it--part of their area.

M: As I recall Humble gave some land to Rice University and then Rice gave it to the NASA people--

T: That's right.

M: --and then I suppose your husband was some place in this trying to persuade people that--

T: Oh, yes, he was quite busy. Very busy.

M: Where does Brown and Root fit into all of this? Brown and Root apparently built much of the Manned Spacecraft Center.

T: Well, I'm not familiar with that. I know that there were many people, many construction companies, connected with it, too; not only Brown & Root, but many others and they continue to be.

M: Did Mr. Thomas travel down here with the NASA people to inspect the site?

T: Oh, yes, he came at different times. They operated pretty much on their own, and certainly didn't divulge any of their decisions until it was all given to President Kennedy and he made the decision.

M: Well, now, Lyndon Johnson was Vice President at the time.

T: Oh, yes.

M: Did he have anything to do with this?

T: Oh, yes, he certainly did because he was very interested that it would come to Texas. And I'm sure he had a lot of influence in doing that.

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M: So he would support your husband in his efforts?

T: Oh, yes.

M: This brings me to Lyndon Johnson. To start off, I'd like to know when you first met him. Do you recall?

T: I did not meet him until he was elected to Congress. Albert had known him before, because he was secretary to Mr. Kleberg, who was a Congressman. As for my knowing him, I probably had met him before, but as to knowing him I did not know him until he came as a member of Congress. We lived in the same apartment building.

M: Where was this? Do you recall?

T: Oh, yes, soon after they were--

M: Where was the apartment?

T: Oh, Woodley Park Towers on Connecticut Avenue. And I don't know now whether that was their first home or not. I don't recall that. But I know they did live there for a number of years, and we lived there. Certainly Bird, as we called her, was very active and she certainly was the most pleasant person in the world to be around; she was so interested and vivacious. I know we would go out and take movies together, especially in the snow, and then when her children--they were--picnics and birthday parties--and then in their home when they purchased a home and had moved, we kept our friendship. She and I would drive to Texas together, she in one car with her children and me in another car. Of course, my children were a little bit older than her children. Our maids knew each other, and it was really a very happy friendship.

M: I have been told that Mrs. Johnson, when she was younger, was fairly shy. Is that true?

T: She was very shy. And she would come to me because I was older and she would say,

"How shall I do this?"

And so we'd discuss it. I don't know that I expressed myself too firmly, but at least we'd discuss it.

M: Did she help her husband campaign?

T: Oh, I'm sure she--

M: Like you did?



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T: Yes. I don't know of her making speeches in those days because as I said, she was shy, but I'm sure she was a great help. She likes people and she meets people with all the sincerity in the world. People recognize that, and I think they love her for it.

M: In what way can a person like Mrs. Johnson or yourself support your politician husband other than going out and campaigning? What else do you do as the wife of a politician?

T: In those days women didn't go out and make too many political speeches. But I know she probably did what I did. You see in those days we didn't have TV and we didn't have too much radio. It was very expensive. She probably worked under the same handicap that we did when we started out campaigning in 1936 and 1937. He'd go in one direction to picnics and barbecues and I would go in the other direction. Just to meet people. So I think that way people--people look to the wives of the members--the politicians--I think very much. Of course, they're taking a more active part than ever before.

M: Do you think the wife has a balancing or calming effect on her politician husband?

T: My husband used to say I was his severest critic. And when he'd get angry with me for expressing myself, he'd say, "Who are you to say that against what I think?" And I'd say, "Well, I'm John Public." So he and I disagreed openly, but we discussed it and of course in the end I saw his way.

M: This has been the role of Mrs. Johnson in regard to her husband?

T: I think so, too. I think she has been a wonderful person to discuss things fairly with him, and I think she has influenced him in a great many ways.

M: I've also been told that she is supposedly one of the most intelligent women in Washington, D. C. Do you agree with this?

T: She is. She has continued to study, and I think she has really grown with her job, in other words. And she has had a job, first as a member in the House, then in the Senate, and then as Vice President--I don't know that many people--wives have had that opportunity. And then to grow with your job as she has--

M: I've heard that. I've heard the expression before, "To grow with the job." What do you mean? How do you grow? Maturity or what?

T: Well, growing is gaining more intelligence of the people, of your country, of the overall picture. Now, you can work with your husband and everything like that, but you don't necessarily grow with him. And there are very many wives that are not particularly interested in politics other than being a wonderful companion and everything. But Mrs. Johnson has been vitally interested in everything. I don't know of anything that she's not interested in. Art, beautification, historical--she has taken a great interest in the Texas historical work. Certainly I think the memory of her will be with the people forever because of beautification. I think she has contributed a great deal for that.

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M: Where do you suppose she got this idea for beautification?

T: Well, I have never heard her say, but I think that driving along the highways as we did--you can look over and see these horrible wrecks of automobiles up and down the highways. I don't know why they happened to find so many places on the highways to put them. But that's what has happened. And I think that East Texas, where she was born and everything, the dogwood and redbud in the springtime really is so beautiful that naturally she would think along--flowers. She has studied everything. I don't think there are any limitations of what her knowledge--and I admire her very much for all of that.

M: Being in Washington since the 1930's you must have known some other First Ladies.

T: Oh, yes, I did. I knew Mrs. Roosevelt and of course Mrs. Truman.

M: Were you impressed with their ability as well?

T: Well, I was impressed with Mrs. Roosevelt. I think she was influenced a great deal by people and by things that she did not really know the base of it. I think her intentions--with the youth movement she got a little off on that because she--and then many--one or two other things that I felt she was not familiar with. I think her intentions were good, but sometimes we let people influence us and we get carried away. But I do think she contributed a great deal and brought back to her husband the people, how they felt about certain things. And I admired her; I've always liked Mrs. Roosevelt. But as I said, I differed with her on some things.

M: Were you impressed with Jacqueline Kennedy's redoing or remodeling of the White House?

T: Yes, I think she did an excellent job. Mrs. Truman--I loved Mrs. Truman for being a woman that was--well, she was a home person; she didn't care to get out and do these rather daring things as Mrs. Kennedy and Mrs. Roosevelt and Mrs. Johnson would do. She let someone else do the decorating and I know that when--. The money for the White House came under my husband's committee, and I think I remarked, when we were invited to the White House before it was opened officially one day, at all the Williamsburg blue in the dining room. And I was afraid that the next time there was a President that more appropriations would have to be made to repaint it. And that's exactly what happened. But I think Mrs. Kennedy made a lasting contribution to the White House, because it has improved historically and brought about--. She had a great influence on empire furniture and certainly made it more valuable and brought out things in the White House that had been somewhat passed over.

M: I have read that Mrs. Eisenhower did not particularly show off the White House to members of Congress, whereas Mrs. Kennedy did. Is this true?

T: Yes, that's true. Mrs. Eisenhower was not particularly interested in people as a whole, I don't think. She loved her friends and she did maybe the formal things that she had to do,

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but she was not, shall I say, just carried away about doing, and entertaining the members or people, really.

M: Well, I've read that the Kennedys were very careful to make members of Congress feel a certain kinship to the White House and to be sure to invite them.

T: They were the first ones to introduce more or less the informality of entertaining members. Before this when we had been invited, the men would have to wear white tie and no one would dare go in a short evening dress. After the Kennedys came in we went in the afternoons to a party, and we never had had that. Mrs. Kennedy would set up tables in each room for hors d'oeuvres--informal entertaining in that way, and so it was quite--

M: Did you enjoy this?

T: Yes, I think we did. However, I'm still a stickler for--I like the informality when it's more often, but I still think that the White House is a--I don't know whether it was looked upon in awe in those days or whether it was a--the men did not like to get out the white ties and the top hat, but I rather liked it. I think men are very handsome in all the white ties and formal dress. And the ladies too.

The War brought about that change. During the War we became a little more relaxed on our formal dress, formal calling. That was the greatest change that has ever been made in Washington. The ladies calling on each other. And I think in a way it has not been good. I don't believe the way it got to be at the last was good, but at the same time you did get to know the people and especially the wives of the members of your husband's committee. I think that was rather good.

M: Well, now we've talked about some of the women in Washington. Were you impressed by Lyndon Johnson as a Congressman back in the 1930's? Do you have any recollection or impressions about him at the time?

T: Well, everyone looked upon him as being of course a very close friend of President Roosevelt.

M: How did he get to be such a close friend?

T: Well, you know, Lyndon has a way of getting to know people, and I think that he met different friends [who] would take him to--and especially Mr. Rayburn--would introduce him to President Roosevelt, and I think the President could see well, here is a young man that's going places, that has vision. Also, I think that naturally he--and Congressman Johnson would agree with President Roosevelt. Just like he said when my husband was elected to the Appropriations Committee and President Roosevelt had lost. Within thirty minutes he called my husband's office and said, "Please come to the White House. I want to see you." What he told him was that if you can't beat them, well, then join them.

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M: So then President Roosevelt welcomed your husband as a member of the Appropriations Committee?

T: Yes. But he still recognized Congressman Johnson as one of the outstanding younger members of the Congress.

M: You were impressed then that Congressman Johnson had the support of the White House?

T: Yes.

M: Even though he was a freshman Congressman?

T: Yes.

M: Did Lyndon Johnson impress you with his energy or his hard work?

T: Oh, yes. I think at that time I wasn't taking politics very seriously. I was busy with my two little girls and getting back and forth to Texas, still hoping that we would be returning.

M: Your husband had the reputation of very courtly manners, and Lyndon Johnson had the reputation of being rather gruff. Is this true?

T: I think it's true. I don't know that Lyndon was particularly gruff; but he was--shall I say if he was speaking to you, he would completely absorb you.

M: How does he do this? I've heard about that.

T: And he would talk directly to one person.

M: You mean when he was giving a speech?

T: No, in a group, one at a time. So he was very convincing in that way, I think.

M: If you were in a group of people and he came in and was talking to you, he would concentrate on you at least for part of that time?

T: Yes.

M: And you as an individual would be taken up in this? Is this what you mean by being absorbed?

T: Yes.

M: And he was thus very persuasive?

T: Yes, he was.

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M: As President, Mr. Johnson must have had a great deal of contact with Mr. Thomas.

T: Yes, he did.

M: Did they work well together?

T: Oh, yes, they worked very well together. Not that Albert always agreed with him, but President Johnson respected my husband because he knew that he was fair and they would work it out some way.

M: President Johnson in Congress had the reputation of being quite an arm twister and sometimes in perhaps an overly forceful manner. Do you have any experience along that line?

T: I don't think he over-forced my husband. He recognized that it couldn't be done that way. Maybe he did it a different way sometimes, but he didn't do it maybe in a manner that would be just like a phrase like that.

M: Then the contact between Lyndon Johnson and your husband was more on a persuasive level. In other words, he would try to persuade Mr. Thomas to his point of view or vice versa?

T: Yes. Albert sometimes had to use some persuasiveness, too. So it was on a basis of "let's do it together," and--

M: But they never did have a violent falling out or disagreement or fight?

T: No, I don't think so.

M: Were you involved with this trip when John F. Kennedy came to Texas in November of 1963 when he was killed in Dallas? Were you involved in any of that?

T: I sat by him that night at the dinner.

M: This was the one in Houston?

T: Yes.

M: Is it correct that both Lyndon Johnson as Vice President and John F. Kennedy were here in Houston for a testimonial-type dinner for you and your husband? Is that right?

T: Yes, it came about--a group of people--Albert had been saying he was going to retire. As a matter of fact, he had made that announcement, so President Kennedy asked him to reconsider; that he was needed very much; and would he consent to stay on. Of course, he was ill at that time, but he was certainly able to carry on his work. So then my husband's

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friends got up this dinner for him, and they asked my husband what did he think about asking President Kennedy to come. He said, "Fine," he thought it would be a wonderful gesture, but after all, he was so busy that he would certainly understand if he did not come. Much to our surprise he did call my husband one day and said, "I'm coming to the dinner. I had planned to go to Texas but not at this particular time. Since your dinner is going to be then, I think I will come." Well, immediately of course word got out and then all the people began to make these plans. First, he'd go to San Antonio, then he'd come here, then he'd go to Fort Worth, then he'd go to Dallas, then he'd go to Austin. Well, it became very involved.

About a week or ten days later he had accepted and the people had begun to make their definite plans here. President Kennedy called my husband and said, "Jackie wants to come also." She had never been on a tour with him just exactly like this so she expressed a desire to come. Well, when that happened we had to get a larger place because the flood of people wanting to come then became so great that they had to open it up from the hotels and other areas and put it in the Coliseum. That's how it happened to be. My husband wanted to open it up to the public--so everybody could come. But then we didn't have any other large place. Too, of course, the Secret Service had a say. All along the time my husband kept saying, "Oh, I hope nothing happens while he's here in Houston at my dinner." I remember very well when we were driving in. We had a Secret Service man in the car--

M: Was this in the motorcade?

T: Motorcade coming in that afternoon. And he would say, "Do you see anything along the road?" And he kept looking that afternoon, I remember very well. Then President Kennedy said he had told them that he would not come to the dinner until after my husband had spoken and the dinner had taken place, because he didn't want to take away from my husband. That he wanted it to be his dinner and that he would come immediately after my husband had spoken--

M: That was really kind.

T: --and because he didn't want it to be--he wanted him to have--I thought that was most considerate of him and certainly that-- He did then and the whole program went off without the slightest thing that would make anyone unhappy.

M: Is this where Vice President Johnson told the story about the Appropriations Committee appointment?

T: No. It was not at that dinner. It was one before--several years before that.

M: Did Vice President Johnson speak at that testimonial?

T: Yes, I think he spoke short--made a short speech.

M: Then the President came in and gave a short speech also?

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T: Yes.

M: And then after that Kennedy left for Dallas?

T: Yes. And my husband went with him.

M: And you stayed here?

T: I was here with some guests from New York and Washington. I told him that I would join him the next night in Austin. I was going up by private plane with some friends that evening, and I was here at the--and of course I was talking to these people; I did not have the radio or television on and some people--. Of course, newspaper people started calling me immediately. I didn't know about where my husband was or what the details of it were for several hours afterwards.

M: Was Mr. Thomas traveling with Kennedy at the time?

T: Oh, yes. He was in the second or third car. And he went with them to the hospital.

M: Well, you must have had some fear for your husband as well as for the President.

T: Of course I was concerned. Yes. Because I didn't know for several--you know--but then I was called and told that no one else except Governor Connally and the President were shot.

M: Mr. Thomas was a witness to the swearing-in ceremony of Lyndon Johnson on the plane?

T: Yes, that one picture went around the world because Albert then showed the strain of his illness and the shock of--. I think it is very pronounced in his expression.

M: How did he happen to be there?

T: Of course, he was on the plane. He was on that plane when it went over there. He had gone to the hospital and was very close with Mrs. Kennedy, because she was very shy here that night. When she got off the plane she asked my husband to hold her arm because--could she hold his arm because President Kennedy had left and gone to the people standing along the side. She was very shy and I think a little frightened over the crowds. Not that she ever dreamed of anything like this that was happening, but anyway immediately after when they were to leave, of course, my husband was asked to get back on the plane--I don't know just how it did happen--but anyway, he was the one that said to President Johnson, "You can't take off until you are sworn in as President of the United States."

That's how he happened to be right there in front. [Mrs. Thomas says that her husband was the first to address Lyndon Johnson as "Mr. President."]

M: So then did Lyndon Johnson arrange for the swearing-in ceremonies?

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T: Yes, they sent for Judge Hughes, Sarah Hughes, because they had to have someone quickly and they were able to get her.

M: And then your husband was a witness to this ceremony?

T: Yes.

M: Then did he fly back to Washington in the plane?

T: Yes, he went on to Washington. I did not know where he was or what time he had gotten there until I was called. And then I caught a midnight plane and went to Washington.

M: Did he ever comment about the trip back to Washington with Lyndon Johnson and Mrs. Kennedy?

T: No, I think they were all so stunned that he never did talk about it.

M: The reason I ask is that there is some controversy at present among writers and this event about what happened in the plane on the way back. And there was some confusion of the people--

T: Yes, I know. I've heard all of that, but he never did make any comment about it. And I can't believe a lot of what I've heard. Because I think President and Mrs. Johnson did everything in this world they could to try to make things pleasant for her--for Mrs. Kennedy. It's not in Bird's heart to-- I'm sure she felt very deeply touched by all of this and certainly she showed it when they did not move immediately into the White House. They gave her much time, and I can't believe all the things that I've heard.

M: Why was it that your husband thought to tell Vice President Johnson that he had to be sworn in as President before the plane took off?

T: Well, he was a lawyer, you know, and after all if he flew back to Washington, then there was no President of the United States. And there had to be. Just when Coolidge was sworn in the circumstances--

M: The transition of power from President Kennedy to President Johnson is considered a masterful transition worked out by President Johnson. Do you agree with this?

T: Yes, I do.

M: That Johnson handled this very well?

T: Yes, I think he handled it very well.



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- M: Did the new President Johnson contact your husband to help with this at all--this transition of power? Did he ask for his help in any way?
- T: I'm sure he did because he knew that-- I don't know the particulars of it, but I'm sure he must have discussed it with him because he knew that my husband was very familiar with the men who had worked with President Kennedy and I think that to carry on--I think probably he did advise him to keep certain people.
- M: Then after Lyndon Johnson took over there was a great deal of activity in Congress apparently to pass a number of bills, some of which had been proposed by President Kennedy and some which came up under President Johnson. There was an unusual amount of Congressional activity in the passage of laws such as Medicare and the Civil Rights Bill, Aid to Highways, Mass Transit, this sort of thing. What role did your husband play in this great activity in Congress? Did the President contact him a lot on this?
- T: Well, yes, he did. But you see at that time my husband was becoming more ill so he did not have-- I know the President would call us some evenings to come to dinner and my husband had come home and retired very early. And, of course, President Johnson wanted to talk about things, and my husband was very tired having worked all day. Finally, he had to tell him that he just could not come in the evening because he was not strong enough really.
- M: What persuaded your husband to run again in 1964?
- T: Well, I think the demand because--he said on the telephone you can get more work done and the things that are needed to be done even by your telephoning more than some new member could come and certainly not get on that committee and be able to work these things out that were so very needed, you see. And in that way he was a great help to the President and certainly to Houston because he would go to the office and do his work and he did that to the very last. And he would go to the office and then if there were any very important roll calls, they would get him over there some way to answer the roll calls. But other than that he didn't stay on the floor. But he was in his committee room and his office.
- M: Did you and your husband travel to Vietnam?
- T: No, I went.
- M: When was this?
- T: December of 1966 to January 1967.
- M: Did you do this in the capacity of a Congresswoman?
- T: Partly. You see, I went out of office on January 3; therefore, I was an accredited newspaper representative after that. But President Johnson had--I know I was getting ready to go to the Far East, and on a Saturday after he had had his throat operation--I did not come into

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my office until about 10:30 one Saturday morning because I was getting ready to leave on this trip. My secretary said to me, "Where have you been?"

I said, "Why?"

She said, "Well, the White House has been frantically trying to find you."

It seems to be my life history almost of people trying to find me. Anyway, I said, "What did they want?"

And she said, "Well, the President wants you to be at Andrews Air Force Base at twelve o'clock because he's leaving the hospital in a helicopter and will take off at twelve o'clock at Andrews Air Force Base."

And I said, "Well, I can't do it." I said, "I'm leaving in the next day or two, I have so much work in the office to do and at home and all, I can't--"

"Well, " she said, "they're calling back in a few minutes."

By that time the Chronicle editor Everett Collier was on the telephone from Houston giving me some things to do, and I was trying to talk to the White House on one phone and Mr. Collier on the other, and I said, I kept saying, "Please tell the President I appreciate his asking me very much to fly to Texas but I can't do it."

And Everett Collier said, "What are you saying?"

I said, "Well, I'm just telling the President I can't go to Texas."

He said, "You get on that plane."

Well, it ended up that I was on the plane, and I was not listed as a passenger, and the Secret Service standing at the gate wouldn't let me in when I got out there. Finally, I saw the President's personal car, and he recognized--. I said, "That man knows me." So he let me on and I sat down with the newspaper people in the back. The President sent back for me and said,

"What are you doing sitting back there?"

I said, "Well, I didn't know where you wanted me to sit."

So he said, "Come up here." I couldn't imagine what he wanted. And finally he came over and he said, "What do you mean--going to Viet Nam?"

I said, "Mr. President, you went to Viet Nam and I'm not nearly as important as you are."

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He said, "All right, then, go on and go."

And that was almost the extent of our conversation to Texas. After we got to Austin and everything, I was sent on over here to spend the weekend with my daughter.

M: Well, why did you go to Viet Nam?

T: Well, frankly, in a way I was running away from myself because it was the first Christmas after my husband had died, and I had had a very strenuous year. The last thing I ever thought of doing was to be a member of Congress, and I had worked hard. I was greatly touched by the struggle that was going on in the United States with the idea of the Viet Nam War. I wanted to see what it was all about; I was interested in the boys; and the Chronicle ran several stories of my going. We asked that letters be sent to me either at my office, my home, or the Chronicle for me to take over there with me. Well, this I did and every letter or card or whatever it was that was given to me for the boys, I either delivered it in person because the Army worked with me on that or I sent it--the ones that I could not give in person at the different camps then I had the Army mail them their letters. So I brought back many messages. I covered all of Viet Nam.

M: Did you come to any conclusion about that War?

T: I did. I was very much interested in what the AID Program was. I went with these people; saw what they were working with--the Vietnamese people--and I came back most enthusiastic. I thought, well, this is going to be the greatest thing outside of the Army that could possibly be because here we were working with these people and getting it over to them that we not only wanted to help them militarily, but to educate them. You see, those people over there, they shrug their shoulders and they said why would we be for our government? What has our government ever done for us? They've never given us education; they've never given us doctors; hospitalization; they've never taught us to do anything with agriculture; to promote any industries to amount to anything; so why should we--and we wanted to have a self-protection; self-security. And they're very close families, those Vietnamese people are, and they think a great deal about their parents and their forefathers. They go back with that religion; they don't want to be disturbed in the areas where they are; and they were completely frustrated.

So I thought now this is something that perhaps the people who can be drawn close together--. So when I came back then I went with the State Department to work to get the right kind of people to go to Viet Nam to work--civilians. And my job was to get the publicity for them, and I think one of my greatest thrills was to see my own words on the Times Square Caterpillar sign.

M: What were those words?

T: Well, it was very much just that recruitment program would be in New York City at a certain date and things like that. It wasn't anything other than it just happened to be my words.

M: Did you come to any conclusion about whether the United States should be fighting that war or not?

T: I felt that it came about in such a way that I couldn't see any other thing that we could do but support what we had started out to do. I still think that we should try to win it honorably and at least have--we can't just withdraw. I can't see that we can do that. I have no solution to the problem, and it was with great regret that I left the AID program. It just sort of fell apart because I don't know where the failure was. Most of the men and women sent over there were dedicated. I lived with them for a month, and I know every time they went out they were in just as much danger as the military people were.

M: Did we pull out the agency people?

T: Well, no money was appropriated to amount to anything. Of course, it's carried on in a very small way but certainly not expanded as it had been hoped for. And the people over there--I guess they lost--they were frustrated, the Vietnamese people, but I do think we accomplished a great deal because we certainly gave them the insight of what could be done.

M: Do you have any idea of how President Kennedy and President Johnson escalated this war in the sense of consulting with Congress? Did they consult with Congress when they escalated the war?

T: Well, if they did, they consulted with the Military Committee and the other higher committees. I don't know to what extent they did that.

M: You did your work with AID after serving--

T: As a member.

M: This was the last part of your husband's term, is that correct?

T: Oh, the last part that I served as a member? Yes.

M: As I recall, you won a special election.

T: Yes.

M: And served--

T: The remainder of the year.

M: Did you want to run for Congress again after that?

T: No, I don't think so.

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M: As I recall, your husband's name was on the ballot.

T: It was on the ballot, and a great many people came to me and asked me to do this. But I did consent because I still felt that with his friendship with the people that I could accomplish a great deal, and I still think I could have. But circumstances and everything like that and the political way that it was put to the people--. They were given a rather peculiar feeling about voting for him--his name. I think the law was very badly--I don't think it had ever been that way before for a man who had passed away--still had to keep his name--I think that should be changed.

M: You would have preferred the name to have been removed from the ballot?

T: Yes, I would have preferred the name to have been removed from the ballot and then if I had wanted to announce, I could have. But that law--I hope will be changed some day where that won't ever reoccur.

M: If you had been elected under his name, or if he had been elected, could you have been appointed?

T: Well, I could have been appointed, but it would have had to be a more or less another electoral--by the vote as I understand it of the electoral vote within the district. So I probably could not have won there.

M: Well, then, it was after that episode that you did your work with AID?

T: Yes.

M: And you worked with AID for how long?

T: Close to eight months I think.

M: And then you left AID. And then what did you do?

T: I'm here.

M: Did you have something to do with this space hall that went up in the Civic Center?

T: Well, of course., I was always hopeful of the building's being named for my husband. I was very happy when that was done.

M: What is the full title? Is it the--

T: Albert Thomas.

M: It's part of the exhibition center, is it not?

T: It's the Albert Thomas Civic and Exhibition--

M: Yes. It's a fine honor.

T: Then the Mayor asked me would I take a job with the city to help establish this national space hall, because the front of the building, you see, inside there will be a National Space Hall of Fame. It will be a very impressive thing because I had been to the Baseball Hall of Fame and had studied there about the way that they have done that, and I think it's very well done. So, the Mayor had appointed a committee., a wonderful committee. Mr. Morgan Davis is head chairman of this committee, and they've divided it up, and they have outstanding men who give time. But I didn't think it was the thing for me to do, start work with the city, until everything was organized. I have been to Washington recently, last week, for the tenth anniversary of the Space Program; they had a most impressive dinner and I was with Mrs. Goddard, Mrs. Dryden, and a great number of men that my husband had worked with. So I was very pleased to be there for that. As I said, I paid my own expenses up until the time, I think, it will be the appropriate time for me to go to work. We hope to have this organized and have a dinner presenting the nominees for this in January 1969.

M: That is all the questions I have for you. I want to thank you for the interview.

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By Lera M. Thomas

to the

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