

INTERVIEW I

DATE: October 10 and 11, 1968

INTERVIEWEE: Judge R.E. Thomason

INTERVIEWER: Paul Bolton P

T: Mr. Bolton, you insist that I tell you something about myself and background before we begin our interview about our mutual friend, President Lyndon B. Johnson.

I was born in Tennessee. My father, who was a pioneer doctor, decided to “go West.” He located in Gainesville, Texas, (Cooke County), and I was reared in that County. I attended public school there and later attended and graduated from Southwestern University, Georgetown, Texas. Still later I attended the University of Texas Law School from which I graduated. Soon after that I was elected County and District Attorney at Gainesville, Texas. I held that office for four years and since my health had not been to good I moved to El Paso, Texas for permanent residence and became associated with a prominent law firm here. In 1916 I was elected to the Texas Legislature from El Paso County. At the beginning of my second term I was made Speaker of the House. No one was nominated against me and I received a unanimous vote for election both of which was unprecedented at that time. In 1927 I was elected Mayor of El Paso and re-elected for a second term without opposition. In 1930 I was elected to Congress where I spent 17 years. I resigned that office in 1947 to become United States District Judge at El Paso for the Western District of Texas, from which office I am now retired.

B: I would like to ask when and where you first met the President?

Thomason--I--2

T: That has been a long time ago and I am not good at remembering details but I shall do my best to be as accurate as possible. During my service in the State Legislature I met his father, Sam Johnson of Johnson City, Texas, who was a member. He and I became good friends and he was largely responsible for my election as Speaker as he was one of my campaign managers. He had a very smart young son who was friendly to everyone. As I recall he was about 10 years old at the time. He was not an official Page nor one of the regularly appointed Pages. He occasionally visited his father and ran errands for him and some of the other members. I then observed that he was a very bright and alert boy with plenty of energy and personality. I have pleasant memories of all the members of the Legislature but especially of Sam Johnson, Ike Culp and W.R. [Bob] Poage. They all cooperated with me in every possible way. Bill Poage was an influential member from the Waco district and was the father of Congressman W.R. (Bob) Poage who is now a very active and able member of the House of Representatives at Washington, D.C. Another of my close friends was Ike Culp from Killeen (Bell Co.) Texas. Culp came to me one day during the session and said his daughter, Oveta, was graduating from high school and wanted to know if I could give her a job. I was very happy to grant his request and she proved to be a very efficient clerk and has been my friend ever since. She is now the widow of the late Governor Hobby and at present owner and editor of the *Houston Post*. Also while I was a member of Congress I was able to put in a good word for her at the time of the organization of the WACs, of which she became the director and she made a distinguished record as such. (I was then a member of the Military Affairs Committee in Congress). Oveta is a very fine and able woman and I admire her very much.

B: When and where was the next time you met Lyndon Johnson?

T: I became a member of the 72nd Congress from the 16th District of Texas in 1931.

Congressman Wurzbach, who represented the San Antonio District died shortly after I was elected and before Congress convened. This caused a vacancy on the Military Affairs Committee of which he had been a member and I was fortunate to be appointed by Speaker John Garner to fill that vacancy. Richard Kleberg of Corpus Christi was elected to succeed Congressman Wurzbach. A few days before Congress convened a handsome young man came to my office and introduced himself as Lyndon B. Johnson, having come to Washington as secretary to Richard Kleberg. He said his father had told him to be sure to come to see me and ask that I have him the same friendship and cooperation that he had given me when I was a young legislator in Austin. That was the beginning of a friendship that has lasted more than thirty years. I soon observed that he had character, ability and personality which should carry him a long way as a prominent young man and a great leader, which has proved true. I had a very efficient secretary named Kate George who took a great delight in helping aspiring young people who came to Washington connected with different Congressmen's offices to learn their way around the Capitol and she took quite a liking to Lyndon from the start. Lyndon had not been there very long until he became well acquainted with the different secretaries and felt the need of some organization among them. He organized and head the "Little Congress" and made a great success of it as well as made quite a reputation as a leader and organizer.

B: Did you have anything to do with Lyndon's election to Congress?

Thomason--I--4

- T: Very little. Not too long after Lyndon went to Washington as secretary to Congressman Kleberg another member of Congress from Texas died, viz: James Buchanan from the Austin district which was in Lyndon's district since his parents still lived in Johnson City. As I recall Lyndon was teaching school in Houston at the time he was chosen by Kleberg to go to Washington. I was one of several Texas Congressmen along with prominent citizens from that district to act as pallbearer at the funeral. All of us were eager for Lyndon to run for Congress to succeed Mr. Buchanan. A number of us who were staying at the Stephen F. Austin Hotel held a caucus and agreed he should make the race and promised to help him with his campaign. He had several strong opponents but as we all know he was elected. He had no money but lots of friends. He was a great friend and ardent admirer of President Roosevelt and ran as a Roosevelt man which was not the popular thing to do in that district.
- B: Were either Lyndon Johnson or his father, Sam Johnson, big speech-makers when they were in their respective lawmaking bodies?
- T: They were not. I cannot recall either of them making any long set speeches. Both spent most of their time doing committee work. I appointed Sam Johnson (when in the Legislature) to the Committee on Agriculture and Livestock Industry. He worked hard on both committees and did a fine job. The President, while in Congress, was appointed on the powerful committee on Naval Affairs which is now Armed Services. Carl Vinson was chairman of the committee and one of the most influential members of the House. He had great faith in Lyndon and predicted to me that he would some day be President. I do not recall any important bills fathered by Sam Johnson when in the Texas Legislature or the President in the National House. They were both very effective in their quiet,

Thomason--I--5

persuasive ways. Sam Johnson was a fine and able man. As I remember it he was active against the impeachment of Governor Jim Ferguson and later he and Lyndon were both good friends of Governor Miriam Ferguson. Mrs. Sam Johnson, like Mrs. Lyndon Johnson, was a great lady. She was beautiful, charming and intellectual and of course she was very proud of her son. She showed little interest in politics except those matters that were of importance to Lyndon. Her greatest interest was in her family. From my observation Lyndon and Lady Bird have had a very happy life together. He is a devoted husband just as he was a devoted son. The Congressional wives loved both Lyndon and Lady Bird. They were very popular with all groups. Lyndon's greatest and most important advisor when in the House was Sam Rayburn who took a great liking to both Lyndon and Lady Bird who were nearly always present at Sam's popular Sunday Night parties held in his apartment. Sam, as Speaker, had an extra room in the Capitol to which he invited many of his friends after a hard day in the House, with no women present. Nick Longworth the idea and called it the "Board of Education." John Gardner was the author of the toast, "Well, boys, let's strike a blow for liberty." It was an entirely social affair with his best friends present which nearly always involved Lyndon.

B: Have you ever visited in his present home?

T: I have been to the LBJ Ranch but not to spend the night. While he has been President, he and Lady Bird have invited Mrs. Thomason and me to be their guests in the White House where we spent the night. They gathered together many of our mutual friends for a social evening. It was a delightful affair and one we shall always treasure.

B: What kind of future does the President have and what will future historians say about him?

Thomason--I--6

T: I think history books of tomorrow will have a big place for him, I think he is and has been one of our greatest presidents and that he will be classed among the best. Few presidents have had so many problems to deal with. I think Vietnam is his most serious one. If he can settle that dispute much of the ill feeling now against him will subside and he will regain much of the popularity that he has enjoyed for so many years. I am not too familiar with his record as a Senator but details can be found in the Congressional Record of that day. No president in history has had such persuasive power as evidenced when he was Majority Leader of the Senate. Civil Rights is the best example of which he was a great advocate.

In my estimation Lyndon B. Johnson will go down in history as a wise statesman and master politician.

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R. E. THOMASON
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE

EL PASO, TEXAS
November 21, 1980

Mr. Paul Bolton
3012 Windsor Road East
Arlington, Texas.

Dear Mr. Bolton:

I have been ill, as you well know and
am also having some trouble with my teeth, which accounts
for the delay in replying to your last letter. In addition,
my secretary is seriously ill so Mrs. Thomason agreed to
do the best she could to type the enclosed.

I authorize you to delete, add or throw
it in the waste basket as you see fit. It is the first
time I have ever taken my own deposition and I think I
ramble a good deal but I have done my best to give you
the information for which you asked.

I hope you are now enjoying good health
and that we meet before too long.

With warm personal regards, I am

Very sincerely

Robert E. Thomason