

INTERVIEW I

DATE: July 24, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: MARY MARGARET WILEY VALENTI

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: Mrs. Valenti's residence, Washington, D.C.

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F: This is an interview with Mary Margaret Valenti, or Mrs. Jack Valenti, in her home in Washington, D.C. The interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

Mary Margaret, I suppose we may as well be informal, we've known each other long enough. Tell me just very briefly something about where you came from and how you happened to get lined up with Lyndon B. Johnson.

V: I was born in Waco, Texas. All of my childhood was spent in Texas. I began school in Austin, Texas and finished high school in San Antonio and then came back to Austin to the University of Texas for my undergraduate work.

It was shortly before I graduated from the University of Texas that I had a part-time job and then for some four or five months a full-time job at a law firm in Austin, Texas; at that time it was called Powell, Wirtz and Rauhut. Senator Johnson, as he was then--this was 1953--had many ties with that law firm, primarily Senator Alvin Wirtz, who was dead at the time I happened to be working at the firm, but hadn't been dead too long.

F: You never knew the Senator?

V: No.

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F: But you'd picked up a certain feeling for him?

V: A great deal. As a matter of fact, I've often said it is one of my regrets that I had never known him because the Johnsons had such deep affection and high regard for him and because I've heard the President so often count him as among the five most important people in his life. Plus Judge Powell, who was the uncle of his long-time secretary Mary Rather. Anyway, through the years Senator Johnson had many ties and associations with this firm.

F: Let me intrude just a moment. You mentioned the five most important. Can you name the other four?

V: I'm sure he named his wife, his mother, Senator Wirtz, I think Speaker Rayburn probably was there and I'm not sure about the fifth right now, I might think of it in a few minutes.

I had for a long time, as a lot of college girls do, thought about what I would do when I finished school; I knew I wanted to travel, I had never been out of Texas, and either perhaps have a job in New York or Washington or Europe. At any rate I happened to be discussing with Judge Powell's secretary one day that I would like to go to Washington and work and was interested in politics, and she said, "Oh, would you? Would you like to work for Senator Johnson?" This was in the fall of 1953, I think.

She called Walter Jenkins; they happened to be officing right across the street because during the interim between sessions of Congress Senator Johnson's office would come to Austin. She called Walter and asked him if he needed any secretaries and he said he did and I went over and was interviewed and about six weeks or so later I came to Washington and began working for him in January of 1954.

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F: This was then when he became the Senate majority leader?

V: He was minority leader in January of 1954.

F: That's right, it was in the fall of 1954--

V: That's right. The election that fall gave the Democrats a majority.

F: Did you work in his senatorial office or in his Minority Leader office?

V: In his senatorial office. I really don't remember when I switched over, he was majority leader when I started working in his Capitol office.

F: Did you really know him before that time?

V: No, I hadn't met him until I came to Washington. In fact I was working in his office for a few days the first time I met him.

F: Did he pay a great deal of attention to new employees?

V: Sweet and friendly and cheerful, very friendly.

F: Did he try to find out about people like you, where you came from and what you wanted and so on?

V: I'm trying to remember. I think I was in sort of a back room of the office, working back there, doing some clerical work, and he happened just to stick his head in. As I remember, Jack Hight, who was working for him at the time, introduced me to him and he said something like, "Is she behaving herself," I think the question was.

And then a few days later he called me into his office to sit down and chat for a few minutes. I don't know why. At the time I thought, and perhaps I was right, that he was trying to see whether or not he thought I would be suitable to be receptionist.

F: Did you become receptionist?

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V: Yes, not too long after that I became receptionist.

F: Did he take much of a hand in the office routine, or did he pretty much leave that to Walter Jenkins to run and the other people?

V: I think probably mostly to Walter because by then he was already terribly busy. He took more then of course than he did in later years; by the time he became majority leader when he was so, so busy, and when he was Vice President I think he had less contact with the staff members.

F: Did you have anything like regular staff meetings?

V: No. At least I can't recall any. I do recall in later years a time or two when all of the staff would get together for maybe a little talk or something and then maybe a party afterwards, but I can't really remember any staff meetings to discuss anything of importance.

F: You got there in time for the campaign of 1954.

V: Yes, but it wasn't much of a campaign.

F: Were you particularly involved in it, or did you pretty well tend to your knitting in Washington?

V: I don't remember that Senator Johnson did any campaigning. His opponent, as you will remember, was Dudley Dougherty and I don't think he even spent any money. My impression is that he refused to accept any sort of help or contribution from anybody because it just wasn't necessary to wage much of a campaign.

F: There wasn't any necessity then for more or less uprooting staff and moving them to Texas?

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V: No, I don't think anyone went to Texas to work in a campaign office.

F: And there was no surprise when he came back?

V: No.

F: Did your duties change with his becoming majority leader?

V: I've been trying to remember and I can't remember exactly when I went to work in his office over in the Capitol. Because of the fact that he was majority leader he had an office in the Capitol and I would suppose it must have been 1957, maybe 1958 but I'm just not sure, when I started to work in his office in the Capitol when he was still majority leader.

F: When did you begin to suspect that he might have real presidential potentialities?

V: Ever since I went to work for him, or at least not too long afterward, I had heard people discuss the possibility. I can remember even in going to the 1956 convention. I remember flying up on a plane with a group of campaign workers, John Connally was among them, and John was sort of figuring out delegates and what the delegations were going to do and so forth. I think John thought he perhaps had a chance. I can't quote anything he said now, but I just have a sort of vague recollection that John was sort of figuring out that it might fall to him if there was a deadlock perhaps.

F: But as you came down toward 1960 you really began to get a certain amount of presidential fever.

V: Yes, I think so.

F: Did the staff in general think that he had a fair chance to get the nomination?

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V: Yes, I suppose they did. You just couldn't conceive of the possibility that, for instance Senator Kennedy would get the nomination because of his youth and being Catholic and all the other arguments that were used against him. I can remember once Horace Busby, who was not on this staff, just sort of putting it down, just didn't think that Kennedy could possibly do it. And I think that probably was the feeling of a great many people. We just couldn't imagine that Senator Kennedy would do it.

On the other hand, I was never one of those who thought Senator Johnson himself was really seeking the nomination. I never thought that he thought he could get the nomination.

F: He never talked to the staff about it?

V: Not as a whole. I'm sure Walter Jenkins and people, but not to the entire staff.

F: And on the other side there was no pressure by the staff to advise him on how to get the nomination?

V: No.

F: Or to seek it?

V: No. I don't think it was that kind of a staff. If he really were going to seek the nomination, I think the people that he would have counseled with the most would have been people like Speaker Rayburn and John Connally, friends and associates, colleagues, but not really staff members.

F: President Johnson throughout his adult lifetime has always been rather close to his staff in some ways and has made friends of them much more so than some other congressmen

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and senators have, as well as vice presidents and presidents. Did you observe this in the period when he was senator and you were on the staff there?

V: Yes. It's quite true. I think he liked being around his staff. When I first began working for him I think his staff was much closer to each other and much closer to him.

F: Before it got larger?

V: Yes before it got larger. But when I first came, I heard lots of stories about his relationships with his staff members, dating back to when he was a member of Congress. He always seemed to draw them into his social life a great deal, even to this day I'm sure he does it.

F: When someone left to go out into the private world or his own particular world, did Senator Johnson sort of give them a "Godspeed and a bon voyage," or did he resent their leaving him?

V: Frequently I think he did resent it, for a variety of complicated, complex reasons, I think. I think he grows very attached to the people who are with him, and felt like he had perhaps trained them and was partly responsible for this new opportunity they were leaving for.

But also, on the other hand, I think there was a feeling of not wanting to lose someone that he liked. He felt very comfortable with the people he knew well on his staff, people he felt he could trust.

F: He never really broke though with anyone who left him?

V: Not that I know of.

F: I find no evidence of that.

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- V: Even if he was irritated, piqued for the moment, I think he always came back.
- F: A great deal has been made in the public press, going back to his senatorial days when he was really first discovered by the press, of his sort of giant rages and feuds and jealousies and so forth. I have pretty largely failed to find that he ever had any feud that he didn't attempt to patch up. Is that a valid conclusion or not?
- V: Yes, I think it is.
- F: Because in the long run he wanted to get back on a working relationship with people even if he didn't like them?
- V: I think so. I haven't thought about it much, but I can't really think of people that he stayed fallen out with. I can remember his getting irritated with various people at times, but something always happened to bring them together again. Maybe he needed them again; for whatever reasons I just don't recall.
- F: Do you have the other instance where perhaps he got at cross purposes with someone who then came to him in need and he forgave and forgot?
- V: I can't think of any instance. I think he's a forgiving, understanding man. If he thinks a person, in his judgment, lacks what he would call character I think then he keeps at arm's distance perhaps. I just can't think of anyone that he has sort of kept on the outside. I don't even recall anyone coming back and wanting to come back.
- F: Another of the cliches is that he never fires anyone, regardless of how poorly that person may serve him. Do you go along with this?
- V: Yes, I've never known him to fire anyone. I've known him to get angry.
- F: Maybe wish they would quit.

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V: Yes.

F: We won't get into personalities but if he got hold of an employee who just went sour, what would he do? Just gradually reduce his responsibilities or his exposure, or do you have any evidences of this?

V: I don't have any evidences. It's difficult to say why various people left during the White House days, and I think it's possible that he might have diminished their responsibilities to where they felt that they should leave but I really can't be specific about anyone like that.

F: From the time you joined his staff forward he was of course a national personage and very much in demand, very much sought, so that the amount of paperwork that fed across his desk must have been enormous. What sort of technique did you use in office management to be sure that he saw what he was supposed to see, that he was not bothered by the things he was not supposed to see? In other words, how did you keep him from getting sort of untidy in detail?

V: At the time when I was his secretary a few years ago, before I married, Walter Jenkins, first of all, saw all the major things; all the major decisions, recommendations, memoranda, anything of that sort would first be funneled through Walter and he would decide which deserved Senator Johnson's and Vice President Johnson's attention. Things came to me first occasionally. If it was something I didn't feel like I could answer myself I might refer it to Walter. I tried to keep as much away from him as possible just because, as you say, the amount of paperwork was enormous, it was staggering. He couldn't possibly do it. He expected this and wanted this. He wanted decisions to be

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made, I think, by other people as much as possible. Because in Walter's long, long association with him he knew him so well and understood the sort of things that he could take the responsibility for himself and those things which Senator Johnson would want to decide for himself. If questions or a request came to me from someone, I would try to refer it to someone else if I thought it could be handled effectively and well by someone else without bothering him with it.

F: On the other side of the coin did Walter ever push him to make decisions that he might otherwise have been reluctant to handle? I'm trying to get Walter's role in this, how strong a sort of alter ego was he.

V: I think Walter served the President very well and he wasn't afraid to keep coming back with something if the President had given him an answer that he didn't think was quite right, quite satisfactory, Walter had a wonderful way of interpreting the President and what he meant and I suppose you might call him an alter-ego. But because he was truly interested in him, concerned, he could recognize when perhaps something merited further discussion. Even if the President had given him a final answer I think he was an intelligent enough man that he would have known that "this is something I must take up with him again."

F: Moving ahead just a minute, were you around when Walter resigned?

V: Yes. I was not working for the President but Jack was.

F: I mean in these very troubled hours when the story first broke. Were you with either Lady Bird or with the President?

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V: No, it was sort of an accident. Jack was in New York with the President the day that happened. I had flown up to do some shopping. I saw Jack at the Waldorf, Jack and I had a room some place else in the hotel, and I knew something was up but I didn't have any idea what it was. Jack just said they were going to be late. I think I came on back by myself to Washington and then Jack called me later that night on the phone and told me what had happened. Then pretty soon after that it was on the late news that night.

F: But all your information is second hand in this?

V: Partly, yes, as far as what happened that day, yes, I was around the White House the few days after that.

F: The Senator and then the Vice President worked everyone long hours, he put in long hours himself. How did he compensate for the long hours that his staff put in?

V: I think it was mainly that people believed in him and liked him well enough, admired him enough, thought he was a man who had a contribution to make to the American political life and that it was enriching our lives.

F: The staff believed in what he was trying to do then?

V: Yes, I think so. I think we had great respect for him, thought he was a very significant man. I remember asking Willie Day Taylor about this one time, why would she be willing to work so hard and so late every night, and she said, "Because whatever else I might be doing wouldn't be half so interesting." I think that was part of the feeling. You'd rather be there.

F: Were you in a position to observe his possible uncertainty over whether to let his name be put into contention for the 1960 presidential nomination?

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V: Yes, I was there. I don't know that I know the whole story by any means. As I said earlier, I never believed that he wanted the 1960 nomination, for whatever his reasons were, perhaps because he thought he couldn't get it.

First of all, I don't think he thought he could get it and he was being pushed by various people to get into the race. I'm sorry, I've forgotten exactly how you phrased the question.

F: What I was wondering, this leads out of the fact that some people have said that they were annoyed by the fact that he would not let a full-scale campaign be mounted for him well in advance. They could see Stuart Symington, they could see John F. Kennedy going around and buttonholing delegates and so on, and in a sense getting a lead, and they had the feeling that he was holding back. The public response at the time was of course, well, he was running the Senate, which was what he was in Washington for and that he had no time for this kind of politics, he was too busy with the nation's business. I was wondering how he felt about this, if this was actually his attitude, or if he did not feel now was the time really to make an open bid for the nomination. Whether he vacillated perhaps.

V: I don't know, perhaps he did. I don't know. I remember his saying something, although I hesitate to quote that. But it seems I remember his saying something, that the reason he finally did allow his name at that press conference that summer just a week or so before the convention when he announced that he would seek the nomination--I think I recall his saying something to the effect that he just didn't think that no one should contest Senator

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Kennedy; that there should be some opposition to him; that someone should represent the South or other parts of the country that Senator Kennedy didn't represent.

I keep going back to that and I just don't think that he really perhaps thought he could get it. I think he was being pushed and urged by the Speaker and by John Connally and by other people who really wanted him to run; perhaps it was very difficult to say just flat no to them. Perhaps that was his way of running, just to stay and manage the Senate and look after his Senate duties and sort of let that be his campaign. But I don't believe so. I think it was just his way of sort of behavior perhaps peculiar to him, he just knew he couldn't get the nomination.

F: Did you have any opportunity to observe his personal relationship with Senator Kennedy when they were both senators?

V: A little, not a great deal.

F: What degree of warmth was it? Cordial or warm?

V: Yes, I would consider them cordial and warm. He was older than Senator Kennedy and more experienced and he was a Senate man and he was in the club and Senator Kennedy wasn't. So it always seemed to me that Senator Kennedy was respectful of him, but there also seemed to be a warmth. But as I say in my office we didn't see a great deal of Senator Kennedy, he wasn't a frequent caller or visitor.

F: And he was not one of the sort of inner clique, so-called?

V: No, he was not.

F: Did you go to Los Angeles?

V: Yes, I did.

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F: I think the best thing to do is just sort of do a narrative of your stay at Los Angeles, how it all developed.

V: It's impossible to describe a convention, I think. Each person gets one little peek at one small facet of it.

F: What were you doing primarily during the convention?

V: Just secretarial work. My mother had gone to the convention with me, which was partly Senator Johnson's generosity, that he would allow me to bring my mother there to be with me, and the fact that she would never get a chance to see a convention probably ever, and certainly not in that way.

F: Not that first hand a view.

V: Yes. Everything is sort of a haze. I remember certain aspects. I remember watching television, the first ballot when Senator Kennedy got it. I remember being there--

F: Was there a feeling among the Johnson adherents that perhaps Kennedy could be stopped on the first ballot, that there was a good chance?

V: I think so. I think that's what they thought was their only chance, that Kennedy could be stopped and then he probably wouldn't make it.

F: Do you have any idea at all that you have a potential vice presidential nominee?

V: No, that was just about the furthest thing from our minds.

F: Do you think he had any idea?

V: No, I don't think he thought so either.

F: How did you first learn about this shift?

V: That he might be the vice presidential nominee?

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F: Yes. Might be and was.

V: That night--

F: This is the night after the nomination?

V: The night of the nomination, the first ballot had been taken and Senator Kennedy had been nominated. Senator Johnson was in his suite and Speaker Rayburn called him.

F: Did the senator show any great disappointment over the outcome of the first ballot?

V: No, I don't think so.

F: He more or less treated it as inevitable.

V: I don't think he was surprised. Speaker Rayburn called him from the convention hall, wherever he was out at convention headquarters, and told him that the word was going around out there that Johnson might be asked by Senator Kennedy to run with him as Vice President and said something about "don't you take it." That's the first that I heard. It seems to me some time later that night that Senator Johnson might have asked someone else, maybe John Connally, on the phone--I don't recall--if there was a lot of talk like that going on out at the convention floor itself.

F: Did he show any sort of great interest in receiving the offer, or was he just resigned and going to let things happen the way they happened?

V: I think it was more of the latter, it was just letting things happen as they were going to happen. Sometimes it's hard to tell what his feelings are, sometimes they're controlled, sometimes I think it's just sort of an acceptance of things that unfold; events, circumstances happened and he accepts them. At that point at any rate I couldn't have detected--

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F: Did you work all that night, or hang around all that night?

V: I know I went to bed. I don't recall how late I stayed up.

F: But when you went to bed this still was not settled as far as you knew?

V: No, it wasn't settled, I'm sure it wasn't. I remember early the next morning--it seems to me that by the time I got in the living room of Senator Johnson's suite that I had heard, I guess perhaps he told me, that Senator Kennedy was coming to see him. By this time Senator Kennedy had called--and I only have this second hand--and I think Mrs. Johnson, I've heard, got the phone call and said that Senator Kennedy wanted to come see him.

Anyway he came. I was in the living room of the suite when Senator Kennedy walked in. I got up and left the two of them alone.

F: And the two talked alone?

V: Yes.

F: Did you have a fair idea of why the senator was there?

V: Yes, everybody was certain by then that he was offering--

F: But you didn't know what the answer would be?

V: No, I didn't.

F: When did you learn?

V: What the answer was going to be?

F: Yes.

V: Not definitely until that afternoon, it was 3 or 4 o'clock. There was a large group of people--

F: He kept his very close counsel--

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- V: He was asking everybody, talking it all over. All sorts of people were advising him. During the day he called various friends to ask them what he should do--Senator Kerr and Bobby Baker were around; I think Jim Rowe was very much around; Philip Graham.
- F: Did you hear much of the advice?
- V: No, I didn't.
- F: So you don't know which way it was weighted?
- V: No. He was seeing people all that day about what he should do. As I understand it later from him, he had asked Senator Kennedy to go back and check with various people and see how they would accept it.

Then that afternoon, it was 3 or 4 o'clock, the Johnsons were having a party for a lot of people who had supported them--I don't know whether it was for all the delegates who had supported him or just the Texas delegates or what, but anyway a lot of supporters had been asked to come by the Johnson suite. It was during that time that all of a sudden the television was switched on and there was Senator Jackson announcing that Senator Johnson was going to be nominated for Vice President. I don't think anyone knew until then that he had made his decision.

- F: What was the crowd reaction?
- V: I think one of disappointment, surprise, astonishment.
- F: It was primarily a Texas group?
- V: I can't really recall. My impression is it was not just Texas, I think it was delegates from all over but I don't really know.
- F: How did the staff feel about it?

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V: I think probably things were sort of backwards. We had been led to believe and letting ourselves believe that Johnson should be the nominee and Kennedy the vice presidential nominee, because their roles had been that way in the Senate. Johnson was the senior man and Kennedy the younger.

F: Did he have a meeting of the staff out there before he left to sort of outline what lay ahead?

V: No, not that I know of.

F: What did you do then as soon as the convention was over?

V: We went back to Texas.

F: When did you begin to get wrapped up in the campaign, fairly shortly?

V: Fairly shortly, I think.

F: What did you do?

V: I performed my customary job as secretary.

F: Did the President--I'm talking about President Johnson--have continuous communication with Senator Kennedy during the campaign? Were they always clearing so that each one knew exactly what the other one was doing, and what he wanted done?

V: I can't really answer that. I would think so, but that was not my--

F: Were their campaign relationships cordial, as far as you saw?

V: As far as I know, yes.

F: No great snafus?

V: I don't think so.

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F: Where were you on election night? Were you in the Driskill? This was when Senator Johnson waited until 3 o'clock because, you know, California wouldn't come in with its vote.

V: I can't remember right now where I was.

F: Well, it's unimportant.

V: Maybe I'll come back to it later if we can, but I just don't recall.

F: What did you get an opportunity to see about the relationships between LBJ and JFK during the vice presidential years?

V: For the period that I was there, because I left in 1962, I would say Mr. Johnson felt that President Kennedy was trying to be as fair as he could to him. I don't think that the Vice President felt a really integral part of the Kennedy Administration, at least it seems to me that way.

F: Did he feel in a sense that he had stepped down for the sake of the party and the country, that the Senate majority leadership was in one sense a more responsible position?

V: I can't really answer what he would think about it. I would think he would think it was more important. I don't think that he ever really wanted to be vice president, I am not sure he even thought they would be elected. At least at the convention, I think that was his feeling; at the convention at Los Angeles I don't think he thought that he and Kennedy would be elected.

F: Did you go on that swing through the South that the President made?

V: Yes.

F: Courthouse to courthouse. Tell me a little bit about that and how this was handled.

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V: I don't know that I can describe much about it except--

F: It must have been fantastic in a way.

V: Oh, yes, it was great fun. It was a great show. But when you've been on a campaign trip the days and the nights just sort of all go together and you don't get much sleep and you miss meals.

F: In one sense he was moving through white Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, fundamentalist territory, representing a Catholic candidate who, to say the least, a lot of the South had some doubts about. Did this present much in the way of problems, or did they receive Mr. Johnson as one of them?

V: Really I don't remember much about the trip except the feeling that it was sort of a big spectacular kind of an occasion; my impression is that it was a successful thing. I don't recall much hostility. I think it was something that he handled very well. I think he feels very much at home with those people and going through the South talking to them from the back of a train. I think he felt that these were his people, people that he could understand, even though he was always a few steps ahead of them, a few steps more forward-looking, more progressive. He'd always taken the South and Texas along, I think, but he's never been patronizing to them. He felt that these were good people and people that he understood very well, felt very much at home with, very much at ease with.

F: And they responded?

V: Yes, I think so.

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- F: Did you get the feeling that the Kennedys understood the particular function he was playing with the South in this? Did they feel he had a peculiar value in this sense?
- V: I don't know, I can't speak to that. I would assume that they did, just because of the fact that he did make that trip through the South. I think that was certainly one of the reasons he was asked to go on the ticket, to try to take the South in the election, but I have no way of knowing what their feeling was about him and his contribution, other than this was certainly supposed to have been the reason that Johnson was asked to be on the ticket.
- F: Vice President Johnson was asked to take a number of trips, some of them of somewhat delicate diplomatic nature, for President Kennedy. Did the idea for these trips originate with President Kennedy or with the Vice President? Did he make suggestions to Mr. Kennedy where he might be helpful?
- V: I can't answer that. I went on one with him before I married.
- F: Which one did you go on, the first one?
- V: That was the one to Southeast Asia. I don't know where it originated.
- F: How much planning did you do on that, how much of the planning was done in the White House?
- V: I did none of the planning.
- F: As far as you know, did Mr. Johnson make any alternative suggestions, say, to the original format that the White House may have laid out?
- V: I don't know about that.
- F: You just went on the trip.

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V: I just went on the trip.

F: How did the trip go?

V: I think very, very well. I think he enjoyed it. This was his first experience of this kind.

F: Did anything unusual or untoward happen?

V: I don't recall any.

F: How did you keep him on schedule?

V: That was not really my job, on a trip like that, because there were State Department people along and various staff people who were more involved in that. His appointments were set up for him, worked out I'm sure partly by the State Department, so that really wasn't my function on a trip like that.

F: I presume he was his usual inexhaustible self on such a trip.

V: Yes, absolutely.

F: Is he a fairly flexible traveler in the sense that if the unexpected or the poor accommodation or something like that shows up, he takes it in stride?

V: I don't recall ever hearing him complain about accommodations or things of that sort. I would not consider President Johnson a flexible man when it comes to lots of changes. He is a man who likes to sleep in his own bed and sort of likes familiar surroundings, but I never observed any complaining about a room that somebody gave him or that the government had asked him to--

F: On a trip like that did he have a preference for the independence of staying in a hotel, or did he expect to stay in the residences of the embassies or guest houses of the local officials?

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V: I have heard it said--there again, I don't know whether it was an outgrowth of that trip or whether it's something I've heard since he has been in the White House or what--

F: It all mixes.

V: Yes, I have to put in the White House years, now it seems so much more fresh, at least from what I know of them, and these other things seem like they happened an awfully long time ago. But I have heard it said that he usually preferred staying in hotels just because he was on his own and you're not a house guest and it's just sort of easier to stay in a hotel, but I'm not really certain that this is true.

F: When these long days and nights of schedule closed down each night, which I'm sure was never early, did he tend to gather together with people like you and rehash the day or forecast the tomorrow?

V: Not with me. I don't think I would have been in on that. I think toward the end of the day he probably would have discussed with some of his top aides, Horace Busby or someone like that; of course speeches and statements were terribly important things, or maybe an ambassador would be around. It seems to me on that trip to Southeast Asia that there were two or three men from the State Department who were specialists, experts, or maybe from the Southeast Asia desk perhaps in the State Department who went along on that trip as advisers, and those would be the kind of people that I think he would have gathered with in the evening.

F: They were the people also who would have seen that he was supplied with the names of the next group of people he was going to meet.

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- V: I can recall seeing big briefing books that he would be given, that he probably read before he left home, or maybe read on the airplane. And of course he studied and he read and he knew what the problems were that he was going to face before he went on one of these trips, so I think they would be the ones who would coach him on these things.
- F: We won't go into your romance and marriage with Jack, but that did of course lead to a change. Were you ever asked to come back to the White House after you left to become a housewife?
- V: Never really seriously. I remember once after we came back to Washington, in fact I'm not sure we'd actually moved, Jack was up here but I was looking for a house. The President sort of jokingly said to me one evening something about coming back, but I didn't take it too seriously and I'm not sure how serious he was about it.
- F: He probably would have been glad to have you.
- V: If I'd said I really wanted to come back maybe he would have found a job for me, but by this time I had a baby and so I knew that I wasn't coming back.
- F: You were in Houston on that fatal swing of JFK through Texas?
- V: Yes.
- F: Tell what you observed first hand in that. They came to Houston from San Antonio, right?
- V: I think that's right, yes.
- F: Did you go down to the--?
- V: I went to the hotel where the Johnsons were and we had dinner with them. Jack and I had dinner there.

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F: What was your impression of how the Johnsons felt about the success of the trip?

V: I don't recall their saying. I had just had a baby about three weeks before that so I was coming back home just to go to bed and Jack was going on the trip. But I don't recall anything being said about the trip.

F: Did you feel that the President was truly worried about the rift between Yarborough and Connally, or do you think that he felt that this was just a matter of personalities and of no great permanent concern?

V: It was based to a large extent on personality. These were just two men who don't get along. Of course at that time Senator Yarborough didn't feel very kindly toward the Vice President either. So I think he thought that it had problems for him.

F: Were you at home when President Kennedy was shot?

V: Yes, I was.

F: Did you have on your radio or TV?

V: Yes, on television. It seems to me someone called me from Jack's office, his advertising office in Houston, and said that President Kennedy had been shot, so I turned on the television then. By that time it was on the news.

F: Were you able to keep up with Jack during this next several hours? Or did you kind of have some idea where he might be?

V: He called me from Dallas and by this time President Johnson, the new President, had already asked him to come to Washington with him. I'm not sure whether at that time he had already asked him to--at one point either that day already or else in the next three or four days, President Johnson asked Jack to come to work for him in Washington for at

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least a year. But I can't remember whether he had already said, "Come with me for at least a year," or not. But at any rate he'd asked Jack to fly back to Washington with him, and Jack just called me from Dallas to say that he was going to Washington.

F: You became very quickly the Widow Valenti.

V: Yes.

F: When did you decide that this was going to be long enough that you ought to move up here?

V: We talked about it. I must say, we debated a little about whether or not Jack should come. He had a good business in Houston and I was very content. It had taken me awhile to adjust to life in Houston and not miss working any more; I had worked for so long it's sort of hard to stop that and just start staying home and being a housewife, but by this time I had adjusted. I had a new baby and I had what I thought was an attractive house so I really wasn't looking for any moves. I would have been perfectly content just to have stayed right there. Also we didn't know exactly what Jack was going to do, and he wanted to know that there really was a job for him, that he wouldn't be spinning his wheels. He wanted a specific job for himself.

But then also I thought it would be enlarging for him, that it was an experience that he should have. So after we discussed it, after he had been in Washington for a while, we decided that I would come up.

F: To talk about the President as a person a little bit and again, a cliché, no man is a hero to his secretary, which I don't think is always true, but nonetheless is this alleged passion for secrecy real?

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V: Yes, I think it is.

F: Do you think that's something innate? Do you think he got burned on a few occasions and decided--?

V: I don't know if you'd call it innate. I would say it's sort of a part of his nature to play his cards close to his chest. I think he thinks it's the better part of wisdom not to be too open, that you're safer. He's cautious in this respect, I think. And also I think he sort of likes secrecy for itself, he sort of thinks that people get into a lot of trouble by talking too much.

F: With the metropolitan press probing and sometimes even leaking things well in advance and perhaps hampering through leaks, do you think he felt he was more effective through holding his options open, as he likes to say?

V: Do I think he was more effective?

F: Yes. Or that he felt he was more effective?

V: I think he thought he was, yes. As you know, this is one of the characteristics of him the press picked up that they found unattractive and didn't like about him, but I don't think that kept him from doing it. I think he still went right on because he thought it was the smartest and the wisest thing to do. And it really was the only way he knew how to operate, I think.

F: Do you know of any instance in which he was going to propose something or somebody and somehow the news leaked and so, in a fit of pique, he withdrew the idea?

V: I don't know of anybody specifically. Everything like this I would get would only be second hand.

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F: Is he as moody as he's pictured?

V: Yes, I think he is.

F: You have also got in one sense to see President Kennedy close hand through being with the Vice President. Do you think that this is a characteristic of active presidents?

V: No, not necessarily. Goodness knows, the job would certainly depress a man at times, but I think President Johnson has always--that's his temperament. When he's high he's very high, and when he's low he can be quite low.

F: This goes back, but it leads up to another question. Where were you when you heard of the heart attack back in 1955?

V: I read it in the paper. I must have been about 23 and I hadn't been working for him very long; maybe I was 22, I think I had been working for him a little over a year. I remember going outside my apartment and picking up a newspaper and it was there on the front page.

F: How did the staff react to this? Did they think this was the end, or did they have confidence that he would come back?

V: I really can't remember any staff feeling.

F: Did he sort of husband his energies after that, or did he get right back into high again?

V: I think he was rather careful, it seemed to me, for a long time after that. He lost the weight that the doctors wanted him to lose and quit smoking, and I think he was rather careful about himself then for a long period.

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F: He is of course sort of a textbook case now for all the heart specialists. Did you get the feeling then, as he moved toward the latter part of his Senate career and the vice presidency, that he to a certain extent lost interest in taking care of his energies?

V: Not, I would say, lost interest. You know, when a man has been very sick and frightened and you think maybe you're going to die, as he probably did, then you're very careful; and as time passes and the danger seems to recede you sort of forget about it and the memory isn't so sharp and clear any more and so you don't take quite as good care, I think. That seems to me that's what happened to him because with the passage of years, it seemed he was less fearful of having another attack.

F: In those latter Senate days and vice presidential days when he was working long hours, not to mention you and others, did he ever complain of being tired?

V: I can't--

F: Or did he just work until he sort of ran out of it?

V: I suppose sometimes I would see him weary. I can't really say that I remember clearly his saying "I'm tired." He always sort of had a way of trying to disguise his feelings. I think this is part of his strong character.

F: Ostensibly he never quit because "I'm tired and I just can't do any more work today?"

V: I don't recall his saying it. As I say, I think it's part of his character that he wants to give the impression of feeling well and running at top form.

F: Is he sensitive to opposition or does he take it in stride?

V: How do you mean that?

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F: I'm thinking of, if he wants to put a program through or he wanted to name somebody to a post and he was opposed in this, did he look on this as a sort of personal affront or was this just part of politics? in other words, was he looking for "yes" people, or would he take good honest opposition as just part of the game?

V: I think he would.

F: If I had opposed him on an issue, and was in a position to oppose him, would he have resented it on my part?

V: No, I don't think so. I think he would respect it most if a man had intelligent views, good judgment, in a man that he respected greatly. I think it's true that any man in that position likes to have some people around him who agree with him and who will do what he wants to be done, but as far as wanting "Yes" men I don't think that's quite true.

F: Did you see any specific examples of sort of extra generous compassion toward people who were in difficulty?

V: Oh, yes, he was always very generous to the people on his staff.

F: In what way?

V: He certainly was very generous to me. He arranged for me to take out a loan at the Johnson City Bank more than once when I needed it; actually Walter Jenkins did this. And this was done for other staff members as well. George Reedy, for example, as I recall borrowed some money at the Johnson City Bank on at least one occasion and others as well.

F: Along that line, you and I both are amateur psychiatrists or psychologists so we needn't go too deeply into this, but do you get the feeling that he sort of had an old-fashioned

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attitude of women having certain superiorities and, to a certain extent, listening with more than normal interest and more heeding than most men would, particularly most men in public life, to his mother, to his wife, to you perhaps on what he could do or what he couldn't do or what he should do or what people were saying?

V: He always has had enormous respect for women. He has never been and is not, I don't think, patronizing to women intellectually. He always sought the judgment of women. Occasionally he would even ask my judgment on something that I really didn't think I was quite equipped to give. It was enormously flattering and it stretched me, as a result. I think I grew a great deal because of it, because he was willing to listen and sought the advice of women.

F: Did he ever give you an assignment which you really had no background for, but which you, to use your word, "stretched" to meet?

V: I can't recall any particular assignment now. I can't really be specific about something now, but something would come up--maybe a memorandum would come to his office perhaps and he would ask me what I thought about something. I would frequently be surprised that he would think that he should ask me.

F: But you didn't give any superficial answer? You had to give a pretty reasoned, careful answer.

V: Yes, I think so.

F: The story is told that his mother used to sit in the audience and grade his speeches and that he listened very carefully to what the grades were. Is this true, as far as you know?

V: I don't know. I've never heard that story before.

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F: Even after he became Senator and Vice President, could his mother in a figurative sense sort of spank his hand and he would listen?

V: His mother?

F: Yes.

V: I don't know. She died in 1958 and I didn't know her well. One summer I went back to the University of Texas for six weeks to get my degree, I guess it must have been 1957 I did that, and so I did a little bit of work for his mother and I got to know her a little bit that summer. But by this time she was getting rather old and she was rather sick.

F: Did you get a feeling he was Mama's favorite?

V: No, I didn't.

F: She pretty well equalized the children?

V: No, I think she favored the weak. It's always been remarkable to me, when I've read things like Eric Goldman's book that he was over-loved, over-protected, and I never agreed with it at all. I always thought she favored the two children in the family who needed the most protection and care. As a matter of fact, I thought sometimes she expected a little bit too much of him.

F: I don't want to probe too deeply into family relationships, except that this sometimes has an effect. Was he pretty understanding of Sam Houston's, let's say, aberrations?

V: Yes, I think he was understanding, but after twenty-five years of it, or whatever, one grows pretty exhausted with another human being's problems. He responded when he could.

F: But he had a strong feeling of family responsibility?

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V: Absolutely, a very strong feeling of family responsibility.

F: So that no matter what had happened to one of the sisters or brother, he would have always stood there--

V: Yes, he would have responded. No matter what they did to him or what they've said to him or about him or how they treated him, he always managed to overlook it, he always rose above it. He was always very big, very generous. And Mrs. Johnson too was always enormously generous about his feeling of obligation toward his family.

F: Did Mrs. Johnson take any hand at all in filling staff appointments?

V: Not that I know of, no.

F: You saw no evidence of it?

V: No.

F: In your presence did the President ever comment on his disappointment of Bobby Baker or Walter Jenkins--?

V: It's very difficult to say, but I don't think the President has ever really accepted the facts as they were given in the press about Walter. My own opinion is that probably to this day the President discounts this and thinks perhaps Walter was framed. This may not be quite true, but at the time I think he was very disbelieving.

F: Do you think there's a certain loyalty there that you can't break through?

V: I just think that over the years--

F: We're not judging guilt or innocence, I'm just trying to get his--

V: Yes. I think over the years because of everything he'd known about Walter nothing in it gave any evidence of any homosexuality. Also, I think partly this. I rather understand

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this because I sort of grew up, perhaps the same way. I think people who grow up in smaller areas, unlike like living in a large metropolitan area like this, I doubt that he had ever had an encounter of any sort with a person with this problem. I think it was such an alien kind of problem to him that he didn't recognize it when it really confronted him.

F: Let's talk a little bit about that 1964 campaign, which brought you back into public life. You went on that Dixie tour, that whistle-stop.

V: Yes. That was fun.

F: Tell us what you know about it.

V: There again, you start trying to remember a campaign where you stay up late and you get four or five hours sleep. Everything just sort of runs together.

F: A lot of pretty young girls, wives, and so forth went along?

V: Yes. We all wore uniforms and we stood out on the back of the train and just sort of talked to the people.

F: How did this little group develop? Did Mrs. Johnson choose them, or did you all volunteer? In other words, you're a natural but some of the others might not have been quite as obvious.

V: I think that Scooter Miller was partly responsible for inviting the girls. As I remember she was sort of in charge of all of us. We were all from the South and it was sort of hoped that we might know some of the people who would get on the train, just to talk to them and be friendly to them. I remember doing a little bit of typing of some letters for Mrs. Johnson, I think a day or two I did that. But our job was just to, I suppose give it some sparkle.

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F: Were you aware of the President's interest in this?

V: I don't remember anything like that.

F: He didn't show his hand at all?

V: I didn't see any evidence of that. I'm sure he was of course concerned that the trip be successful.

F: But he wasn't calling in every stop to see how it was going or anything like that?

V: I don't think our communications were that good.

F: He pretty well left it up to Mrs. Johnson and her staff to run it?

V: That's my impression, but I don't really know.

F: Did you run into any particular problems on the trip? Did it go fairly smoothly?

V: Yes, I think it went fairly smoothly. I do remember one place, I believe it was Mississippi, where there were some ugly signs. But I think on the whole it went very smoothly. I know there certainly were high spirits on the train; all of us had a wonderful time and thought it was a great adventure.

F: You felt that it was a real successful vote-getting device, among other things?

V: I don't know that it was successful because I don't think we carried very many of the Southern states. I think Goldwater carried most of them. From that standpoint I guess one can't say it was successful.

F: of course you don't know what the alternative would have been.

V: Yes. But a campaign train is still a fascinating and intriguing thing: it's an old-fashioned way to campaign and people I think enjoy it and it does create some feeling of good will.

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F: Back to the vice presidency, during the period when you were still aboard did you see any signs at all of a developing feud between LBJ and Robert Kennedy? Was it real, as far as you know?

V: Yes, I think it was very real.

F: Did you get any evidence in Los Angeles of Bobby's indisposition toward--?

V: Yes, he was opposed to his nomination there.

F: Did Mr. Johnson realize it?

V: Yes, he knew of his opposition. He came to his suite--there again I'm getting--

F: Who is "he" in this?

V: Bobby Kennedy.

F: Bobby Kennedy came to the Johnson suite.

V: Bobby Kennedy came to the Johnson suite some time during that day. I don't know if I saw him or not, I'm not sure at this time. I had a room sort of off the suite. I cannot say who told me this, all of the story, but I was told fairly shortly thereafter that Robert Kennedy came to his suite saying something to the effect that he didn't think Senator Johnson should go on the ticket, he was talking about the opposition to him and so on.

And John Connally is supposed to have said to him, "You tell your brother that he's the only Kennedy we'll talk to," something about like that. Also Speaker Rayburn is supposed to have put him down rather sharply.

F: It's rather interesting in view of the fact that of course neither Connally nor Rayburn at the outset wanted him to accept the vice-presidential nomination.

V: Yes, it is quite interesting.

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F: But I'm sure that this in one sense hardened them. Within the limits of your knowledge why do you think John F. Kennedy overrode his brother's opposition?

V: Why do I think he did?

F: Yes.

V: Because I think he thought that he would be an asset to him. It has never been clear. I remember that I wrote something for Senator Johnson's diary after I came back from that convention. It was never clear in my mind and in the minds of a lot of people there whether when Robert Kennedy came to the suite, he came as an emissary of Senator John Kennedy, or whether he came on his own. It was rather confusing there. It could be possible that Senator John Kennedy was having some second thoughts and he sent his brother to see if he couldn't sort of shake this thing up a bit and discourage Senator Johnson, or it could be that Robert Kennedy just came on his own because he was so opposed to the nomination, that he came on his own to try to talk Senator Johnson out of it.

F: As far as you know there was never any feeling on Senator Johnson's part that John Kennedy had given him a token invitation with the idea that he would then refuse it and he could go on to somebody else?

V: You mean Senator Kennedy?

F: Yes.

V: No, I don't think that Senator Johnson ever thought that Senator Kennedy had given him a token invitation to run on the ticket with him.

F: You think this was sincere?

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V: Absolutely.

F: And the best ticket.

V: Absolutely. I think he thought that he wanted him, I think that he thought that he needed him, and I think that he thought that he had no other choice but to go on it if Senator Kennedy wanted him for various reasons. It would be like he was a poor loser; or, if he had not gone on the ticket with Senator Kennedy and if Senator Kennedy had lost the election, then Senator Kennedy and his supporters in the Senate could have reorganized the Senate and named him leader or he could have named whoever he wanted leader. So I think he always took him at his word.

F: Do you have any idea at all of how Mrs. Johnson felt about his accepting the vice presidential nomination?

V: I think she was very much opposed to it.

F: Did she ever talk to you about it?

V: No. The reason I say that is the day that we heard that he was going to be nominated at this party that I mentioned that was going on, we turned on the television and Senator Jackson said that Senator Johnson was going to be the vice presidential nominee, I happened to look in Mrs. Johnson's direction and she began to cry. Then I heard later on that she had discussed this with other people and was quite disappointed.

I think she liked his being in the Senate, it was a good life for them, and I think she was reluctant for him to give it up.

F: Yes, this would change styles somewhat.

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V: Yes, and I think she liked representing the State of Texas and felt very comfortable with that.

F: Back to the LBJ-RFK feud, within your acquaintance did it get more or less irreconcilable?

V: Not while I was there. I do remember one time, 1961, or it could have been early 1962, I just don't remember, when Robert Kennedy came to see the Vice President, the purpose of which was to sort of talk it over with him. He had heard that the Vice President thought that he, Robert Kennedy, was trying to undercut him, and he came to try to straighten things out and assure him that was not true.

F: Do you think this was sincere?

V: I don't know.

F: Did the Vice President have any idea that Robert Kennedy and others were trying to get him dropped in 1964?

V: I think that's what he thought.

F: Did he feel that President Kennedy would go along with them?

V: I don't know. It's hard to know. By this time I think we were living in Houston, but I remember reading about some press conferences where President Kennedy had been asked and he said that Mr. Johnson was going to be on the ticket with him.

Even the year and a half when Jack and I lived in Houston and we went out to the Vice President's ranch when he came to Texas on weekends to see him and be with him quite frequently, I always had a feeling, it's nothing I can put my finger on, nothing that he said, but he did begin to talk increasingly of retiring. I always had the feeling that he

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thought this was probably the end of the political road for him; that he probably would not be asked, but I can't really cite anything specifically that was said. I think he really thought that he was not going to run again; that Kennedy was going to drop him.

F: Speaking of retirement, did you have any inkling of the March 31 speech?

V: No. I had heard him for a long time say that he wasn't going to run.

F: Of course he talks on every side of things so that you can always--

V: I can remember hearing him talk about it so frequently, but I hadn't seen him in a good while right before that so I didn't really know that it was going to happen then.

F: Did LBJ ever talk to his staff about his relationships with Robert Kennedy or with the cabinet? Did he feel frozen out to some extent while he was Vice President?

V: You say "felt frozen out with the Cabinet," I don't know whether he felt he had any important significant part to play in the Kennedy Administration. It seems to me I recall his saying something about he thought that Robert Kennedy once was even trying to boom John Glenn to take his place on the ticket. This was I think 1961 or 1962 perhaps.

F: Were you ever in a position that if you were real friendly with some of the so-called Kennedy clique that it might hurt your relationship with the Vice President?

V: I didn't get to know any what I'd call Kennedy people until I came back after Jack was in the White House. Since then we've had a few friends, but so far as I know it has never damaged our relationship with the President.

F: President Johnson never asked you "How can you be my friend and--"

V: I don't think he ever mistrusted me. I think that I worked for him long enough that he knew that he was first.

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F: Did he make any attempt, on the other hand, to sort of build bridges to the Kennedy people?

V: I don't think he ever made any attempt to build bridges to Robert Kennedy. I think they had reached such an impasse in their relationship. I think he made every attempt right after President Kennedy's assassination to do what he thought was appropriate and right and to extend himself as far as he possibly could toward the whole Kennedy family. I don't think anyone could find any fault with what he did then. I think he always sort of anticipated they were going to have trouble and I think he felt that Bobby Kennedy would consider him a usurper. Then I think things just gradually sort of kept on going downhill in their relationship.

F: Do you think that the trouble was primarily then between, let's say the Kennedy brothers and LBJ, or do you think it was between supporters of the two groups of men?

V: I think there was trouble on both sides. I think it was ill feeling between President Johnson and Senator Robert Kennedy, and I think there were Kennedy people who didn't like President Johnson and Johnson people who didn't like Senator Kennedy. I think there was a lot of animosity there.

F: Do you think the Kennedy followers' reluctance to accept Johnson was because of sort of a different culture from which he sprang, or do you think it was because of personal outlooks?

V: I think there was hardly any difference in the political philosophy and what they were trying to accomplish in legislative goals between President Johnson and President Kennedy. I think it was a startling blow to the people around President Kennedy and the

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Kennedy Administration. It was a startling blow to the country when he was killed.

They had looked forward to eight years of a marvelous time and there was a certain gaiety about the whole administration, the life in Washington; and all of a sudden it was cut off short and I think it was a big jolt.

F: I can accept that, because I had from March until the following January to get used to the idea and I still couldn't quite.

Were there any deep divisions within Mr. Johnson's staff, either when he was senator or vice president, that were in any way injurious to what he was trying to do? One, did they exist; and, two, did they get in the way of progress?

V: You mean feelings among the staff members?

F: Yes.

V: Not that I know of. By this time his staff had gotten so large and he was spending most of his time in his office in the Capitol and not so much over in the Senate Office Building; by this time he really was a little bit out of touch with a lot of the people.

F: He had by this time at least three staffs. He had the Preparedness Committee and the Space and so forth and the investigating committee that he was on; he had the majority leader; he had the senatorial staff. Was there any hard and fast division among the staffs, or could you one day work on one area and the next week work on another? In other words, there was a certain amount of interplay.

V: I think there were pretty much divisions. There were a few people I suppose who got around among those staffs. For one thing, the offices were spread so far apart that it just physically made it very difficult to bounce around.

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F: There was no sort of jealousy of one staff as against another?

V: I wasn't aware of it if there was.

F: In the earlier days, if there were any differences, did he try to harmonize them or did he let the staff pretty well work out its own differences?

V: I have never seen any evidence that he was ever aware of any staff friction. I think he sort of stayed above it. I don't think any staff arguments ever got to him.

F: Where did they stop, with Walter?

V: I would think so, yes.

F: Do you feel that he lost some effectiveness when Walter quit?

V: Yes, I think the loss of Walter was a great blow to him and to the administration of his staff. Also, Walter was such a selfless man.

F: And you can't beat that long experience.

V: Absolutely. And understanding of the President and all of the things that he did for both the President and Mrs. Johnson. Walter had no personal ambitions, the only thing he cared about was doing his job and there was no ego involved there. I think if Walter had stayed on--I think the staff lost a great deal of efficiency.

F: On the trips to the ranch, which were at least partially social, was politics the overriding issue, or was there a great deal of instances when people were just enjoying themselves?

V: When was this?

F: Oh, say, for instance when you and Jack would come up from Houston on the weekends.

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- V: I think always politics was discussed; also the President is greatly interested in his ranch. There were weekends for relaxing. He loved to ride around and look at his cattle and the deer.
- F: He didn't sort of build a weekend party with the idea of putting together a little political package?
- V: No, I don't think so. It was just to relax, to be with friends and enjoy himself.
- F: And since they were all interested in politics they talked some. Thank you, Mrs. Valenti.
- End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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Mary Margaret Valenti
Donor

February 27, 2000
Date

John W. Paul
Archivist of the United States

2-13-00
Date