

INTERVIEW II

DATE: February 28, 1984

INTERVIEWEE: MARY MARGARET VALENTI

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

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

Tape 1 of 1

G: Let's just start with the heart attack, for lack of anything better.

V: Okay.

G: Let me ask you to recount your writing the letter and how this brought you to the hospital when he was recuperating.

V: Well, it's not much of a story. He was receiving lots of mail. I suppose that's what prompted me to do it, because there were many good-will, speedy-recovery kinds of letters. So I wrote one [response], which was obviously given to him. I believe it was Juanita [Roberts] who told me that he liked the letter and he wanted me to come out to work some at the hospital.

G: Let me ask you to describe what the hospital situation was like. Was he receiving a steady flow of visitors? Was there an effort to limit the amount of--?

V: I think there was an effort to limit. There was quite a setup there. Mrs. Johnson was staying at the hospital, had a room down the hall. I remember having to walk down a corridor to his room. I don't know that I even stayed more than one day or two days. I only remember walking in one day and knocking, with a message. He told me to come

Valenti – II -- 2

in. He seemed to be in good spirits, and I think there were some visitors there with him then.

I remember that already Juanita was trying to help them work out a diet for him, counting the calories, that sort of thing. So that sort of thing was already set into motion. Perhaps Mrs. Johnson dictated a letter to me; I remember a part of a letter. Luci I think was at Camp Mystic, and I remember her saying to Luci that she had already lost six pounds herself and that she enjoyed it so much--oh, she said something about "you won't recognize me again." Well, I better stop there, because I'm not sure my recollection is very good, but at any rate, she had lost six pounds and she was pleased with her progress.

G: Did he adapt to this new diet reluctantly?

V: I don't really recall. I remember Mrs. Johnson saying he was a man who likes three desserts. (Laughter) It seems to me that Juanita must have gone to the Ranch that fall--perhaps you know--and was working out more menus and counting the calories and so forth. I don't know if he found it difficult or not. I would guess that he would, but I don't know.

G: Did he say anything about your letter when you went out there?

V: I don't recall.

G: What was his mood during the time he was in the hospital?

V: Well, the brief time that I was there I thought he seemed in good spirits.

G: Really?

V: Joking.

G: Did you feel that he was going to get better?

Valenti – II -- 3

V: Yes. You know, at twenty-two you think everyone is immortal. But he looked good, I thought, and his spirits seemed good. Apparently the danger period was passed.

G: I gather he had gotten a tremendous amount of mail, get-well sort of correspondence, and a lot from his colleagues in the Senate. Do you think this had an effect on him? Did he refer to it?

V: I couldn't say.

G: Did the doctors have a difficult time keeping him from engaging in too much activity while he was there?

V: I don't know. As I say, I'm not even sure that I was there more than one afternoon.

G: It wasn't part of your responsibility to keep the radio off or the television or anything?

V: No.

G: Okay. Anything on any of the visitors? I think Vice President Nixon visited one day.

V: I remember Bill Rogers coming to see him.

G: Anything in particular on that?

V: No, just he was very handsome; that's what I noticed. (Laughter)

G: How about Richard Russell? Were you there when Senator Russell came?

V: No. No, I don't think so.

G: Then he spent, what, a month at his home in Washington recuperating, approximately?

V: I don't know how long it was. I was there the day he left. Juanita and I shared an apartment then and we went over to his house. He complained about my weight, told her I should diet, sort of waved a finger at me, said, "You make her diet" or something to that effect. I just remember there. So they got in the car and went to the airport.

Valenti – II -- 4

G: So your next contact with him was when you went down to the Ranch, is that right, in the fall?

V: Yes.

G: Why did you go down there, do you recall?

V: Well, in those days Congress would adjourn early, much earlier [than now]. It didn't stay in session all year long. And so Congress adjourned, and there was an office opened in Austin, and I liked to go to Austin. My parents lived there and I had friends there, had grown up there. So I always went.

G: You had gone to U.T.?

V: Yes, I had.

G: Well, was he more active then? Was he exercising and walking?

V: Yes, I think he was. I remember one evening it seems that I and some other people took a short walk. I thought we went to look at a little house on his ranch, but I can't think now of a small house, unless it might have been the foreman's house perhaps that we all went to look at. It was early evening, five or six o'clock perhaps.

G: Well, I'm told that he would walk to Cousin Oriole's [Bailey].

V: Oh, yes. Famous walks.

G: Is this something that he did that fall when he was recuperating?

V: I suppose it started then. I don't really know because I was not at the Ranch a good deal during that time. But later on, in years to come, I know it was frequently something that he and Mrs. Johnson and their dinner guests might do, to take a walk down to Cousin Oriole's after dinner.

Valenti – II -- 5

G: I'm told that the doctors had told him to walk a certain distance, and he had figured out that Cousin Oriole's was just about that distance or a little farther. Let me ask you to describe those sorts of walks, what he would do and talk about, where he would go.

V: Well, we would all troop down there and sometimes Cousin Oriole would already be in bed. He would call to her and we'd go in and sit down. He would tease Cousin Oriole, and one of the things he liked to do--I can remember Jesse Kellam doing this. He would get somebody else to talk to Cousin Oriole for him, because Cousin Oriole was deaf or hard of hearing. So he talked to Mr. Kellam so he didn't have to raise his voice, and then Mr. Kellam would have to raise his voice to make Cousin Oriole hear.

G: Would he stop by the cemetery, too, on these trips usually?

V: I was trying to [remember]. Those walks, it seemed to me, were mostly when it was dark, after dinner. I can't recall now stopping by the graveyard.

G: How about drives at sunset? Did he do that, that fall when he was recovering, do you know? I know he did later.

V: That fall when he was recovering?

G: Yes.

V: I was not on any of those. I don't know. As I say, I did not spend a lot of time out there.

G: He also built a swimming pool.

V: Yes.

G: That was the year they built the pool, I guess, and he supervised that. Do you have any recollections of construction or his interest in that?

V: Sure. No, I don't.

Valenti – II -- 6

- G: Okay. Did he talk about his future while you were there and whether or not he would be able to resume his duties as majority leader?
- V: I never heard at that time any speculation on his part that he wanted to retire.
- G: What was on his mind? Was it politics? Was it--?
- V: As I say, I don't believe that I spent very much time that fall after his heart attack.
- G: Okay. He had been mentioned prominently before the heart attack as a possibility for the Democratic nomination for president in 1956, and then of course the heart attack seemed to end the speculation.
- V: Although wasn't his name put in nomination?
- G: It was. It was. But as a favorite son. Did he talk any about the possibility of being president that fall when you were out there?
- V: I never heard him talk about the possibility of being president at any time.
- G: Is that right?
- V: I was one of those who never believed he thought he would get the nomination. He frequently said, as a matter of fact, that no southerner would be elected president in his lifetime.
- G: Is that right?
- V: So I thought it was sort of folly for a lot of people who speculated that he wanted to be president. Well, perhaps it crossed his mind, but I never heard him talk about getting the nomination on his own because I heard just the opposite. I heard him on the contrary say that no southerner would be elected in his lifetime.
- G: Okay. Is there anything else in 1955 that you recall?

Valenti – II -- 7

V: No. I don't think so.

G: I wanted to ask you, did you have an opportunity to meet his mother during this period?

V: Yes.

G: Let me ask you to describe her and his relationship with her.

V: Oh, now if you're talking about 1955, no. My most vivid memories of his mother don't start until 1957. He gave me a six-weeks leave of absence so I could come back to the University [of Texas] and finish my degree. That was the summer of 1957. That summer I did a little bit of work for his mother and got to know her a little bit better.

G: We'll save that for 1957.

Well, I don't have anything else for 1955 then. We've discussed the thirteen points and his speech at Whitney. Let's go on to 1956. Anything on the Southern Manifesto and his decision not to sign that?

V: No.

G: Do you know if he got pressure to sign it?

V: No, I don't.

G: Okay. You were down in Texas in the spring when he met with his district leaders there in March.

V: Was this 1956?

G: Yes. And this is the time that he made the decision to challenge Allan Shivers for control of the Democratic machinery. Sam Rayburn more or less drafted him by saying, "I nominate Lyndon Johnson as a favorite son and chairman of the delegation." Were you

Valenti – II -- 8

there when any of this was taking place? Do you recall his reaction to Rayburn's move?

Was he reluctant to challenge Shivers?

V: I don't know. Where was Rayburn when he--?

G: He was in Bonham. He called some reporter and just--

V: And where was Senator Johnson?

G: I think he was at the Ranch, but he could have been in Washington. I'm not sure. This was before the--

V: This is 1956 you're saying?

G: Yes.

V: See, I would not have been working right in his office in 1956. I was trying to see what I could remember. My only memory really of that year is that he'd sent John Connally down to head the campaign. Is that correct?

G: That's right.

V: And I came down to work, and I remember hearing John Connally--you know, [there were] a lot of people in that room of the Driskill Hotel. John Connally was talking to him on the phone, and John was getting very angry. I remember his saying to him, "I didn't leave my family for three weeks and come down here and try to defeat you." Obviously Senator Johnson had said something that raised his ire. But I don't know what his part of the conversation was.

G: Probably disagreement over some tactic, I guess.

Did you ever hear Mr. Johnson talk about challenging Shivers? Did he ever seem reluctant? That was a pretty difficult assignment.

Valenti – II -- 9

V: No, I didn't.

G: Did you work at all with the district men in getting out the vote at the precinct conventions and county conventions?

V: No.

G: Anything on LBJ's relationship with the labor-liberals during this period? They were for him, but the alliance didn't last through the end of the year.

V: What happened?

G: Well, of course a lot of that depends on who you talk to, but basically they fell out by the time of the fall convention. They wanted to replace all of the [State Democratic] Executive Committee right away, and they wanted their own people for committeeman and committeewoman.

V: I'm trying to recall some names from that.

G: Frankie Randolph was the--

V: I guess Stuart--

G: Stuart Long.

V: Gosh, those are names from the past. I can't give you a thing.

G: Nothing on the labor?

V: No.

G: Okay. Now you did go to the--oh, let me ask you just one thing. When you did get the returns in and it showed that--

(Interruption)

Valenti – II -- 10

Do you recall how you learned that he had defeated Shivers in the precinct convention?

Were you in Texas then?

V: I probably was, but I'm trying to remember where the convention was.

G: Well, the first one was in Dallas, I think that May. But by this time they'd already had the precinct conventions and the county conventions. It was clear that they had defeated the Shivers people. They had controlled the conventions.

V: I can't be helpful on that.

G: Well, let's go on and talk about the national convention because you did go to that. His name was placed in nomination. I think John Connally made the speech as a matter of fact, didn't he?

V: Yes.

G: I believe that's right.

V: Probably, yes. I think he probably did.

G: What do you remember about that convention? That was your first national convention?

V: Yes, it was my first. I had lots of fun. If you're very young and never been to a convention before, it's an interesting place to be.

G: Did you attend any of the caucuses of the Texas delegation?

V: No.

G: Do you recall attending any of the sessions, being on the floor when they had any of the speeches or nominations? Did you hear the nomination?

V: When you said that John Connally had nominated him, it sounded so right, so familiar, I was trying to remember where I was, if I heard it. But I can't recall it now.

Valenti – II -- 11

G: Let's see.

(Interruption)

--let me get this on tape.

V: People hate to be reminded. They would say my memory's not so good. Where should I start?

G: Just start with this anecdote that you. . . .

V: My main memory of the 1956 convention is a planeload of people, staff people, John Connally included, going to Chicago, and where John had figured out where Senator Johnson would get the nomination. That's about it.

G: Did he envision a deadlock?

V: I don't recall how he got the numbers, but he did have sort of figured out I guess that people would fall by the way. I really don't--it just stands out in my mind that John had it figured out that that's the way it was going to work out.

G: Of course, [Adlai] Stevenson did get the nomination right away, then threw the vice presidential nomination open to the convention rather than naming his own. Do you recall the reaction of Mr. Johnson and Sam Rayburn to this move?

V: No, I don't. I can imagine what it was.

G: Were you still a supporter of Stevenson at this point?

V: No, by this point I suppose I had switched my loyalties and my allegiance.

G: They also seemed to have opposed Estes Kefauver for the vice presidential nominee and even went to [Albert] Gore and to [John] Kennedy and [Hubert] Humphrey. Do you remember that, their efforts there to organize opposition?

Valenti – II -- 12

V: No.

G: Okay. I would like to get not just anything you remember about the legislation itself, but also your insights on his attitude toward civil rights and race relations in general, because you must have observed this over the years.

V: Well, I observed things, I don't know exactly the year, but I remember hearing him say that he didn't think someone should be penalized because he or she happened to be born black. And he would tell the story, which you have probably heard a thousand times by now, about Zephyr Wright, the cook who worked for the Johnsons, and how years ago the Johnson servants would drive from Texas to Washington, and Washington to Texas, and how Zephyr, his cook whom he loved, they would stop along the road and she'd have to go into the woods in order to go to the bathroom. This he found was a terrible indignity.

G: Did he himself ever, do you think, witness firsthand acts of discrimination against members of his staff who were black?

V: Other than that one with Zephyr, I would have to think--I do not know of instances. Well, a funny story he used to tell about Gene Williams, who worked for him. The Johnsons used to always have beagle dogs, and one year Senator Johnson wanted the Williamses, when they were driving from Washington to Texas, to take their beagle. Gene is supposed to have said, "It's hard enough for a black man to find a place to stay between here and Texas, let alone with a beagle dog."

G: Did Mr. Johnson himself give any indication of being prejudiced against blacks?

V: I never heard him say anything.

Valenti – II -- 13

(Interruption)

I cannot recall ever hearing any joke, using any sort of words that would be derogatory, disparaging toward blacks. I can't say that I have.

G: His close friends in the Senate were the southerners, I guess, people like Richard Russell. Was it difficult for him to take a position opposite theirs on civil rights?

V: I would only be guessing, speculating. I think he had such admiration and respect for Senator Russell, and I think he thought that he would not have been named leader of the Democrats if it had not been for Senator Russell. So I think it must have pained him because of his tremendous regard for Senator Russell.

G: It's difficult to understand exactly what Russell's position was in 1957. He seems to have been reconciled to the fact that the Democratic Party needed to pass the civil rights bill and that his main mission must have been to get one that was acceptable to the South, or that the South could live with. Do you have any recollections of LBJ's discussions with Russell here or any insights on Russell's attitude?

V: In 1957?

G: 1957, yes.

V: No, I don't.

G: Do you recall where you were when the bill was passed and any insights you have on that?

V: No, I don't.

G: Strom Thurmond did make a one-man filibuster. Do you remember that?

V: No, I don't.

Valenti – II -- 14

G: Okay. Anything else on the civil rights bill?

V: No.

G: The Little Rock crisis occurred shortly thereafter. Did this take some of the luster off the civil rights bill?

V: No--you're talking about when President Eisenhower sent troops?

G: Yes.

V: I don't know if it did. Luster off in what way? Do you mean that--?

G: Well, it looked like this transformation would not be as smooth as perhaps they had originally thought.

V: No, it seems to me it was done very--the transformation in the South has gone full speed ahead.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II

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