

INTERVIEW IV

DATE: February 26, 1985

INTERVIEWEE: MARY MARGARET VALENTI

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

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

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

G: Let me ask you to describe how you ended up moving your desk into his [LBJ's] office.

V: Well, my recollection is that he'd said something to the effect that he would like for me to have a desk in the reception room and also a desk in his office, that he had seen [this done] in some other offices. If my recollection is [correct], he was talking about some cabinet officers, cabinet secretaries, whose secretaries had a desk in their same office. So he thought it would be convenient for him just to be able to say something right there to me without having to pick up the phone and say it over the intercom. I think it did work. It was a very efficient way for me to operate, because sometimes I would get a call, for example, from someone, perhaps a journalist, requesting an appointment, and I would say, "Just a moment," and I would just speak across the room to him. That made it [easy]. Sometimes he would just get right on the phone to that person, or if it was someone calling from the press gallery, he'd say, "Tell him to come on down."

It made it very easy to work in that respect. It was confining sometimes because there were times when I couldn't type, if he was on the telephone or if he was meeting with someone. At times I'd have to be very quiet myself and talk on the telephone in a

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very subdued way, or sometimes I would have to tell whoever was answering the phones not to buzz me for a while, because it would interrupt him. As I say, I think it did work. It was a very efficient way, convenient way to [work].

G: Did he try to listen to your conversations at the same time he was having his own?

V: I don't think so. (Laughter)

G: Did he ever ask you to leave if he was having an important private meeting?

V: A very few times, not very often. I remember once Bobby Kennedy came to see him, and he must have asked Senator Johnson—or Vice President Johnson he probably was then—if I could leave.

G: And what did—?

V: They were over sort of in a huddle, and obviously Bobby Kennedy must have said something to him about wanting to talk to him privately and didn't want me to be there, so Vice President Johnson then asked me if I would leave the room for a few minutes.

G: Were you sworn to any sort of secrecy?

V: No. No. I never would have said anything. I think I was very careful.

G: That must have given you really an excellent view of his dealings with other senators and individuals that even other staff members didn't have.

V: Yes, I suppose so. I was very busy. If he was meeting with someone, frequently calls were still put through to me and I went about my business. I didn't just stop working and sit there.

G: You didn't sit and listen. I see. When did that transition take place? Do you recall what year it was?

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- V: I really don't remember. I don't remember what year that was.
- G: Would it be around 1957 or 1958, do you think, that early?
- V: More like 1958-59, I would think.
- G: Did that make it difficult for you to keep up with what was going on outside his office as a result?
- V: Probably did. And probably a lot went on that I wasn't aware of.
- G: How did you divide your time? Did you spend most of your time at that inside desk or most of it out in the reception [room]?
- V: Most of it inside. Very little outside. I think the other idea was just an idea that I would have a desk out there, but it sort of ended up, if you are sitting at a desk and you have all your papers there and an accumulation of the things that you work with, it's very difficult to move them back and forth. I mean, one would be sort of home base, the other would be sort of like an auxiliary desk.
- G: Did you continue in that arrangement until you left?
- V: Until I quit, yes.
- G: As long as we're on the staff, let me ask you, Bill Moyers came to work for him during that year, in 1960. Do you recall that?
- V: Yes. A little bit. See, Bill had first worked for him when he was about nineteen before he had graduated from college, and I had met Bill then. I guess it was just maybe in the summer perhaps he was there. And I remember Bill—I wouldn't have been able to put my finger on exactly when it was that he came back. I thought he came back sooner than 1960. What month? It must have been early 1960.

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G: Early 1960, very early.

V: Yes. Because I know he was at the [Democratic National] Convention. I remember him being very hard working. I think Mrs. Johnson liked him very much.

G: [He was] from Marshall.

V: Yes.

G: What did he do, do you recall?

V: I don't know. I don't remember that.

G: Okay.

(Interruption)

V: Let's see, what was your question again? Why did he delay announcing [his presidential candidacy]?

G: Right.

V: I don't think he thought he would be nominated in any case, no matter what he did. I think he thought he had to run the Senate. But I am one of those who believes that Lyndon Johnson never thought he would be the Democratic nominee. I heard him say more than once that no southerner in his lifetime would be nominated by the Democratic Party as its presidential candidate. I think he was very realistic about that, and I think it was sort of a hardheaded kind of realism and that his feeling was that it would be futile to try.

G: Why do you think then he ultimately did make the race?

V: I remember vaguely hearing him say—I believe that he said that it was the Speaker's [Sam Rayburn] view and his view that there should be some opposition at the convention

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to Senator [John] Kennedy, that Senator Kennedy should not be allowed to win the nomination without any fight at all.

G: Was this because of differences in experience or qualifications or just in order to make it more interesting?

V: Oh, I think differences in qualifications and experience. I think there was some feeling—part of it was [expressed in] Senator Johnson's campaign when he did announce—about needing to nominate a candidate with a little gray in his hair. I think the feeling was that Senator Kennedy was too young and too inexperienced.

G: The other consideration other than age was one of health, and this was one that worked I guess against both candidates, Senator Johnson because he had had that heart attack, and Senator Kennedy because of discussion of his own health. Was LBJ at all reluctant to run because of his health, do you think?

V: I've never heard that suggested.

G: Really?

V: He, I think, demonstrated tremendous vigor in the way he ran the Senate and acted as the Senate leader. You know, he stayed up all night and slept at the Senate during the civil rights debate.

G: Did he, do you think, talk to his doctors during this period and get their advice on whether or not [to run]?

V: Not that I know of.

G: Really? Okay. His heart attack just, as far as he was concerned, was not a factor at all?

V: I don't think so.

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G: Okay. Now, with regard to Senator Kennedy's health and certainly the rumors and the facts that floated around later in the convention and earlier in the campaign, do you recall LBJ's relationship with all of this? Did he discourage it, did he encourage it? Did he himself—?

V: Discussion about health?

G: Yes.

V: No, I don't think he encouraged it.

G: Really? Can you be more explicit? Can you recall any conversations he had with—?

V: No, I can't be. I have a vague memory that there was some displeasure over the press conference that John Connally and India Edwards had where they questioned Senator Kennedy's health, but I couldn't say that Senator Johnson felt that way, that he thought it was not a wise idea for them to talk about his health.

(Interruption)

G: I notice here that he went to hear Billy Graham speak on June 26. Do you have any idea when his acquaintance with Billy Graham began?

V: No, I don't.

G: Let me ask you to describe his—it seems like during this time or later he started attending church on a more regular basis. Do you know why or when that started and what the—?

V: I don't know why. I can't answer that.

G: Do you think it was later that—?

(Interruption)

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—the convention. Let me ask you to recount everything you remember about that, including where you stayed.

V: I don't remember the name of the hotel. Do you know what it is?

G: Well, was it the Biltmore?

V: I just don't remember that.

G: That was the headquarters. The big old hotel.

V: Okay, well, then I guess that's where we were. Yes. My mother was with me, and she and I shared a room off to one side of the suite, the Johnson suite. They were on the other side.

G: Were you present when any of these discussions took place, do you remember?

V: With Senator Kennedy?

G: Yes.

V: No. I was there. I was in the suite, in the living room suite. Senator Johnson asked me if I would sit in the living room with him until Senator Kennedy got there, and then after he got there, for me to get up and leave. So I stood up to shake hands I suppose with Senator Kennedy and then I left the room.

G: Did LBJ indicate why Senator Kennedy was coming over?

V: Well, no. I think this memo [in the Prepresidential Diary] indicates—which I suppose I wrote—there was some question about why Senator Kennedy was coming. Some people thought—as I say, I have written here that Mrs. Johnson and Bobby Baker had a bet as to what his reason would be. I don't recall that. But at any rate, I do remember that there

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was some discussion about whether or not he was coming to offer him the vice presidential nomination or whether he wasn't.

G: What did you think?

V: I suppose I thought he was going to offer it to him.

G: Then did LBJ recount the conversation after Senator Kennedy left?

V: No. I'm trying to remember. I don't recall much being said about it. I can't recall anything specific. Obviously I've written some things here.

(Interruption)

G: Well, did Senator Kennedy actually offer him the vice presidential nomination that first time they met?

V: Oh, I think so. That's my recollection of it.

G: There were actually two meetings, were there not?

V: With Senator Kennedy?

G: Yes.

V: That's not my memory. My memory was that Senator Kennedy came, and there was lots of debate about why he was coming, and then that he did offer it to him. And then as I have written down here someplace, I guess, of course, Senator Johnson didn't know whether or not he wanted to take it. Then he must have said to him to go back and check it out with his own people and with the other possible candidates. Is that what I say in here someplace?

G: That's right.

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V: The confusion was, during the day, with Bobby Kennedy coming, and then of course all—the confusion was whether or not Senator Kennedy had changed his mind or maybe he had just offered it as a gesture to him and wasn't really sincere about it, that it was just sort of a peace making gesture.

G: Tell me how the people in the Johnson entourage reacted to the offer, if it was in fact an offer?

V: Well, I think, you know, there were a lot of people who were opposed to it, a lot of people, Texas people. You're talking about just staff, or Texas people?

G: Well, both.

V: Well, I think a lot of Texas people were obviously very upset by it. I can't recall specifically a staff person who was upset about it.

G: What was Mrs. Johnson's reaction to it?

V: I think I said this once before to you, but at any rate, all I remember about her was that the Johnsons were giving a party one afternoon, I believe it was for all the people who had supported him, sort of a cocktail party in his suite. It seems to me he rushed out of his bedroom—perhaps he had gone in there for a call—and then he rushed into the living room where everyone was to switch on the television, and there you saw Senator [Henry "Scoop"] Jackson announcing that Senator Johnson was going to be nominated as vice president. And I remember looking in Mrs. Johnson's direction, and I thought she was crying.

G: How about John Connally?

V: I think he was very upset by it.

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G: Any conversations in particular that you recall?

J: Well, I know that after the Johnsons got back to the Ranch, John Connally called. I believe I'm right that the Connallys and the [Walter] Jenkinses took a little vacation trip together, perhaps Las Vegas or something, at any rate were gone for a few days. At some point or other, John Connally and Senator Johnson had a telephone conversation, sort of trying to work out their problems and difficulties. My recollection is that John Connally was upset that he had taken it. I may be wrong in that, though.

G: Oh, I think that's right. Well, how would you analyze it? Was it a problem of having raised money in running against John Kennedy and now having to go back and say, "We're on the ticket with him and we want him to win"? Was this part of Connally's problem, do you think?

V: I felt the people who were opposed to it just sort of thought the ticket should have been the other way around: Johnson should have been the nominee and Kennedy would have been a good vice presidential candidate. I think it was hard for them to see Senator Johnson taking second place to Senator Kennedy because they thought he was more able, a better candidate. He was older and more experienced.

G: But then there was nothing they could do after Kennedy got the nomination, so the alternatives were not to be the vice presidential nominee or to be the vice presidential nominee. It wouldn't have any effect on Kennedy at this point because he was already nominated. How did Connally and Johnson resolve their difference on this, do you remember?

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V: I just remember that one telephone conversation. I don't know whether or not it worked anything out, except they talked to each other. My recollection is that John sort of stayed pretty much away from the campaign until Senator Kennedy was going to make an appearance in Fort Worth perhaps, and I think John Connally then did participate in whatever that event was that Senator Kennedy was there for. But before that I think John had not done anything. Is that right?

G: That certainly seems to be correct.

What about Bobby Baker? Do you recall what Baker wanted him to do?

V: No, I don't. I think Bobby probably was there in the suite, though, when there were a lot of meetings. Bobby was close to Senator [Robert] Kerr, and Senator Kerr at first was opposed to Johnson's taking the vice presidential nomination, then he came around to the idea.

G: He did.

V: So my guess would be that if Bobby had had any reluctance earlier that he must have changed his mind.

G: Sam Rayburn?

V: Well, the Speaker was against it. He was one of the first to call, and maybe the first to call in from the convention floor and say the rumor was going around that Mr. Johnson might be nominated for vice president, that he didn't want him to take it. But then the next day he came around. I don't think Senator Johnson would have taken it if people like that had been unalterably opposed.

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G: Do you have any explanation for Rayburn's conversion to the viewpoint that he should accept the nomination?

V: No, I don't.

G: What about yourself? Did you have an opinion?

V: I don't recall. (Laughter) I wasn't adamant that he shouldn't do it. I guess I felt like a lot of people that the ticket should have been the other way around, but I think if that's what he decided to do that. . . . I don't recall that I was adamantly against it.

G: Or adamantly in favor of it either?

V: Yes.

G: Well, from a staff member's standpoint, one way to set up the for or against thing would be simply whether to have a campaign or not to have a campaign. If he didn't [accept the nomination], of course he would still be running for the Senate, but it was a whole lot easier than running for vice president. Do you think the staff as a whole looked forward to a season of campaigning all over the country or perhaps not?

V: Oh, I think it was a very exciting time.

G: Was it?

V: Yes.

G: Was there any exhilaration from the convention, do you think, that might have fed this excitement?

V: Yes, I think perhaps there—conventions are exhausting affairs. There is such activity at a convention. One person never really has a complete picture of what is going on. There is so much going on in different rooms, different meetings are being held. One person

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cannot give you the whole picture. Conventions are fatiguing and I think people went away from that convention exhausted, maybe not as clear headed as they might have been. But I think the idea of a national campaign was exciting, and I think people came away from it feeling some sense of exhilaration.

G: Did LBJ ever tell you why he decided to take the nomination?

V: Well, that day, when he was in the process of deciding what to do, I recall that he thought it would be wrong—I don't remember the exact words he used, but he thought it would be unbecoming—that is my word, not his—for him to turn down the vice presidential nomination. I think he thought he would look like a spoilsport and someone who didn't take defeat well. I think I recall his saying he didn't think they'd win anyway, and secondly he thought that if they didn't win, that Senator Kennedy could reorganize the Senate and either name himself as Democratic leader or else pick the person who would be the leader.

G: Did he ever refer to Nixon during these explanations?

V: No.

G: As a desire to keep Nixon from being president?

V: No, I don't remember that. No.

G: Okay. Well, did he feel like, do you think, that he was going to be much more of a public figure than he had been as a senator?

V: As vice president?

G: Yes.

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V: Oh, I don't think he ever wanted to be vice president. I think he quoted a John Nance Garner expression on that, it wasn't worth a warm bucket of spit. I think that was what he thought. I don't think he thought that that would be something that he would really enjoy.

G: You don't think he had any illusions about the power of the office?

V: No. No.

G: Or if he occupied it, that it might be more dynamic than—

V: No.

G: Really? Okay. Are you sure at this point?

V: About that?

G: Yes.

V: I think every vice president—maybe he thought that perhaps he could find ways to enhance the office, get it to do things that would be more substantive than attending social functions when the President couldn't attend the dinner. But constitutionally he doesn't have the power, and I think that was his—he didn't really—the only way he could have any power was if the President gave it to him.

G: Well now, let me ask you to discuss Robert Kennedy's visits.

V: At the convention?

G: Yes.

V: I was not in the room at the time. I may have been in the room when he first arrived. But when that group of men were there and discussing what Senator Johnson should do, I was not in the room. I just would hear about something afterwards.

G: Does that account that you wrote summarize basically what happened?

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V: Yes. Right.

G: Are you aware of anything else regarding Robert Kennedy's [visit]?

V: No.

G: As long as we're on that subject and this, the convention, is such a pivotal point in their relationship, let me ask you to analyze their relationship, Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.

V: Well, I don't think they liked each other. I think that's probably an understatement. There was always a great deal of suspicion, perhaps that's a better way to put it, on both sides it seems to me.

G: Do you have any idea how far back this dated? Did it predate the convention, the mutual—?

V: I don't know.

G: Do you think the convention was an irritant in this [relationship]?

V: Yes. I think the way Bobby Kennedy was treated by this group of powerful men, you know, Speaker Rayburn and John Connally, it had to irritate him.

G: Saying that they only wanted to deal with his brother?

V: Yes. The only Kennedy they wanted to talk to from here on was Senator Kennedy.

G: How would you explain their dislike? Was it simply a question of being political adversaries or was it a question, do you think, of personalities or philosophies or cultures?

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V: I don't think philosophies. I think they'd been political adversaries. Some unkind, cruel things had been said on both sides, by the Kennedy people and by the Johnson people.

And then I think perhaps it was exacerbated by this incident in Los Angeles.

G: It almost seems that each man became obsessed with the other one after a time.

V: Yes.

G: Was there a valid perspective on each side, or was it all one's fault or all the other's fault or what?

V: I don't think things like that are ever all one person's fault.

G: They were, theoretically, no longer adversaries after the convention, but what happened?

V: I don't know of anything else. I don't know of anything other than what happened at the convention.

G: You know, some descriptions simply conclude that there was some sort of bad chemistry between them.

V: I think so, yes. That always figures into it whenever people don't like each other, you know, sort of more than just dislike. I would say that was probably true.

G: Did LBJ make an effort to get along with Robert Kennedy, do you think?

V: I think he did. Whether or not it was misread by Bobby Kennedy as just being perhaps Johnson's way of sort of manipulating him, I don't know. It seems to me that there was—and I recall once after the election Bobby Kennedy came to see Vice President Johnson to try to sort of work things out, to iron things out. That he had heard that Vice President Johnson thought he'd been trying to undercut him and he came to sort of reassure him that that wasn't true.

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G: Can you recall what happened at the meeting?

V: No, that was when I had to leave the room.

G: Oh, really? Oh, I see. Did LBJ tell you about it later?

V: He must have. But he didn't elaborate.

G: LBJ's relations with Jack Kennedy seemed to have been relatively good, on the other hand.

V: I think so, yes. I think one of the promises he wanted at the convention was that he would still have sort of a veto power over Texas appointees, and there was a time or two when the White House moved on appointing someone in Texas, perhaps to a judgeship, without consulting Vice President Johnson and he was very angry about it. I'm sorry, I've forgotten what your question was.

G: Well, no, continue.

V: But anyway, my recollection is that always President Kennedy would try to placate Vice President Johnson and try to reassure him that he was trying to help. It always seemed to me that President Kennedy was trying to be sensitive to Vice President Johnson and the fact that he had given up leadership of the Senate to run as vice president. He had been a powerful and important senator to give up his vote in the Senate. I think he was sensitive to what he had given up.

G: That's a good point.

Were there any other conditions other than the patronage one that you recall?

V: No, I don't.

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G: Anything in terms of activities or committees that he might head? I notice he was thinking—

V: Somewhere along there came the—what, the [National Aeronautics and] Space [Council]?

G: Yes.

V: And then [the President's Committee on] Equal Employment [Opportunity].

G: PCEEO and the Peace Corps Committee, too, I think.

Oh, one other thing on the convention I wanted to ask you about was the joint debate between [LBJ and JFK before] the Texas and [Massachusetts delegations]. Do you recall how that [came about]? As I recall, Senator Kennedy sent a telegram to all the delegations.

V: Yes. I'm sure it was a clerical error that Senator Johnson got one, too. So he took advantage of it and since Senator Kennedy had sent it, he couldn't sort of back off.

G: Whose idea was it to have a debate, do you know?

V: I don't remember that, no.

G: Really? Do you think it was his? Do you think it was someone else's?

V: I just don't know.

G: Did you go to the [debate]?

V: Yes.

G: Tell me what it was like.

V: Well, all the Texas delegation was there, of course, and Senator Kennedy came in alone. He was very good about those things. I think he did that when he spoke before the

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ministers in Houston, too, and it's very appealing. I think you see this young man all alone, nobody along to help him out. I think the feeling as I heard it expressed afterwards [was] that they thought Senator Johnson had won it on points and Senator Kennedy, though, had sort of won it on charm.

G: What was LBJ's feeling about it, do you know? Did he feel like it had been fairly close?

V: In the debate?

G: Yes.

V: I don't recall anything.

G: You mentioned that you didn't feel that he was disappointed that he didn't get the presidential nomination, is that right?

V: Yes.

G: Was he later disappointed? I'm talking about in the time after the convention. Did he later experience sort of a remorse that he had taken the nomination?

V: No, I don't think so. I never heard him express that.

G: Really? Okay. He went back to the Ranch and then to Acapulco, stayed at [Miguel] Alemán's home. Do you remember that at all?

V: I remember being there, but I don't remember anything outstanding from that trip.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview IV

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