

INTERVIEW V

DATE: September 20, 1985

INTERVIEWEE: MARY MARGARET VALENTI

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

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

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G: There was a *New York Times* story at the time he was in Mexico that he had received ten thousand unfavorable wires or telegrams to the effect that he—

V: When was this?

G: When he was in Acapulco. This was after the convention.

V: Yes, after the--yes.

G: Telegrams expressing dismay that he had taken the vice-presidential nomination. Was there a lot of negative mail on this?

V: I don't recall that.

G: Really? Do you think that the people who opposed his taking it were people other than Texas supporters? Were they friends of his in New York, for example, that regretted that he was going on the ticket that you know of?

V: I can't--I think the feeling among his supporters--well, it was just that the ticket should have been the other way around. That's what I think we've talked about before.

G: I wonder about some of his Jewish supporters, because of Joe Kennedy's record in the past, if they felt like he shouldn't be on the ticket with Joe Kennedy's son.

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V: Well, I don't know. I think my general feeling is on things that I've picked up specifically, where I don't know, but just perhaps someone like Ed Weisl, Sr., people who had known Joe Kennedy, tended to blame his son for some of the father's sins, perhaps.

G: Okay, the next item is that trip to Hyannis Port to meet with the Kennedy organization. Did you go on that trip, do you--?

V: Yes, yes, I did.

G: Let me ask you to just describe what you remember about it.

V: Oh, goodness. I remember the Johnsons stayed in Senator Kennedy's house. I must have stayed at a hotel or someplace; I don't remember where I stayed, but certainly not there. There were some Texas supporters around and some of them were sort of excited about meeting and seeing some of the glamorous Kennedy people. I remember watching a little bit of Mrs. Kennedy's taping something. I just caught maybe the tail end of it and I think she spoke in French, perhaps for part of it, and I remember her husband afterwards telling her, "That's terrific." I just remembered being on the porch for a little bit afterwards and seeing Lee Radziwill. (Laughter) And some Texan said something to her like "You must be a Kennedy," and she just sort of brushed him off and said, "No, I"--I don't know, just that little episode sort of stuck in my mind. This sophisticated eastern woman and this Texan who meant to be friendly and sweet, paying her a compliment in his mind. But she shrugged him off.

G: Was Joe Kennedy there?

V: I don't recall that. He probably was, but I don't recall it.

G: How would you describe the mood there?

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V: I thought it--ebullience. Sort of somewhat festive, exciting.

G: Were they working on campaign strategy at that point, or were they--?

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

G: Was the relationship between the Kennedy forces and the Johnson forces during that time at Hyannis reasonably good?

V: I thought so. I mean, I saw no signs of friction. It may have been naïveté on my part, but I saw nothing.

G: On the way to Hyannis, you stopped in Kansas City and met with Truman. Do you remember that?

V: No, I don't.

G: Okay, and from Hyannis he went to Nashville to meet with southern leaders and address a Young Democrats rally, and stayed in the Governor's Mansion. Anything on that?

V: I don't recall that trip.

(Interruption)

G: Let's talk generally about the train trip. You were saying that LBJ would speak from the rear platform, is that right?

V: Yes.

G: Tell me first to describe the--how many cars were there on the train?

V: I have no idea.

G: Was the press in one area, do you think?

V: I can't answer that. I just don't know. The press is usually sort of in one--you know, together in one spot, but I just don't--

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G: How would a characteristic stop go? What would happen? They would stop and--would they pick up local officials, or--?

V: No, it was all planned, so that local officials would come out and there'd be usually a band or whatever or something like that, and then people who were running for office, as I recall, might get on, say, the stop before, join him at the stop before and ride to the next stop, and you know, people who are running for office like to join him in certain ways. You'd have--maybe [inaudible]--it seems to me I recall George Smathers, for instance, getting on someplace and riding, maybe through Florida, perhaps, and that sort of thing.

G: There would be music, is that right?

V: (Laughter) It's silly on these things. You're so exhausted, you know, you didn't get any sleep. Everyone's pointing at George Smathers. A man's standing outside who had a little beanie with a propeller on top of it, and George Smathers said, "That's a Harvard man." Things like that sort of stand out in your mind. You laugh at anything, just anything, you're so--

(Laughter)

G: Were the logistics hard on that trip? Was it harder than it would be, say, to fly into a place and speak at a prearranged podium rather than speaking off the rear of the platform on the train, do you think?

V: How do you mean logistics? In what--?

G: Well, having the microphones work, having the crowds--

V: Oh, yes.

G: --at the right place? [Inaudible]

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V: Well, the crowds knew where to come. There was only one place that the train stops, you know, you have to stop there on the railroad track and that's that.

But certainly a thing like that is a very colorful kind of--in 1960 many people didn't travel on trains so much anymore. Politicians normally by that time were flying. So it had certain built-in advantages that way. It was colorful. I guess no one had really done that perhaps since Truman, had they?

G: I think that's right.

V: So it had a certain cachet that flying, you know, that rallies at a hotel don't have. And then also you go through small towns in the South which maybe politicians, certainly a politician for a national office, might not stop anymore. Like Culpeper, you know.

G: Tell me what the attitude of the South was on civil rights at this point and LBJ's being on the ticket, having passed that civil rights bill in 1957. Did you sense any hostility?

V: Toward him?

G: Yes, in the South at this point.

V: Well, on the train trip people came out to see him who were supporters, I think, or other people who wanted to see a national candidate. I don't remember seeing signs. I don't remember seeing any sort of anger, or any sort of angry demonstrations.

G: Do you think LBJ regarded the train trip as a success?

V: Yes, I think so. I gather it was enough so that he sent his wife in 1964.

G: You went on that trip as well. How would you contrast them, just comparing the two trips? Aside from the fact that he didn't go.

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V: Yes. Oh, heavens, I don't know how [inaudible]. I can't do that, I don't know. I can't draw any big contrasts. I mean, parallels I think are easier to find. There's a certain drama in a--it's more of an event to go on a [train].

G: Any other--any particular stops that you recall that were significant?
(Interruption. Some material missed)

V: No. I don't think so.

I don't know *what* he was. I'd have to ask Bob about that, but. . . . I may be mistaken, but I don't think he was an ophthalmologist.

But he just never was able to wear those contacts successfully, as I recall.

G: How long did he try them, do you recall?

V: I don't remember. It always seemed to irritate his eyes.

G: Okay, then you had the Adolphus Hotel incident. Before we started the tape, you indicated that you weren't actually with him in the crowd.

V: No, I wasn't.

G: Tell me what you recall about the episode and his own decision to go through the lobby rather than take some back way.

V: Well, I recall being in the hotel room with him and Mrs. Johnson, and people had told him about the angry crowd that was waiting outside the Adolphus and suggesting that maybe he might want to go in a back way. And he said no, he didn't want to do that, he wanted to walk through the crowd.

G: Did he give a reason, or--?

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V: I don't remember. No, I don't think so. I think the paper quotes him as sort of saying, he says something like "If the day has come when I can't walk with my lady through the Adolphus Hotel, I want to know it," or something to that effect. [The] paper quotes him on that, I'm sure. I think to him it was an affront that he couldn't walk in the hotel, into the front entrance, the main entrance of the hotel, that he'd have to go the back way. Obviously, I think he saw the political capital to be gained by walking through that crowd. I think a few weeks earlier Adlai Stevenson had been heckled by the crowd in Dallas.

G: So he did walk through the crowd? And did you see him afterward, or did you--what was his reaction to the incident?

V: I don't remember seeing him afterwards.

G: You mentioned that he had said something to the effect that this had brought Senator [Richard] Russell into the campaign. Do you remember what he said about that, or--?

V: No, I don't.

G: I think Russell called him, didn't he, after that happened?

V: I don't know that. I just--somewhere I've heard that that was the thing that brought Senator Russell into it.

G: Well, Russell did, I think, come and speak at the Rice Hotel in Houston a couple of days after that.

Okay, what about election day? What do you remember about that? You were in Austin.

V: Excuse me a second.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview V

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