

INTERVIEW VI

DATE: May 8, 1986

INTERVIEWEE: MARY MARGARET VALENTI

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

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

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G: I want to ask you to just describe, generally, Lyndon Johnson's move from being majority leader to vice president. Was he enthusiastic about this?

V: I always felt that he was making a great effort to be a good team player. And if he had any negative feelings about it, he didn't show them. He wanted very much to—and there was an excitement about the campaign, and there was excitement about Senator Kennedy as the nominee. And it would have been very unlike him to have expressed any disappointment. If he felt that way, I think he managed to conceal it from everybody.

G: What were the advantages of becoming vice president over majority leader? Was there more visibility to the job?

M: I don't think there were any advantages for him. I think when we discussed once before about—at the convention, I recall his discussing why he thought he should take the nomination, why he thought he should run with Senator Kennedy. I think he felt that he couldn't turn him down, and that—he thought that it was the appropriate thing for him to do. He thought that if he didn't and if Kennedy was angry, [if] it made him angry, and if Kennedy lost the election and came back to the Senate, that he could reorganize the Senate if he wanted to—either name himself as Leader, or name his own man as Leader.

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I even recall once his saying—I think he was still at the convention, after he had been nominated for vice president—that he didn't think they would win the election—and there are some people who think they didn't. (Laughter) Mayor Daley helped a good deal in Chicago.

G: What do you think about that?

V: What do I think?

G: About the irregularities. Any insights?

V: I don't know—I just know what I've read about what happened in Illinois. I don't know—I just have no way of knowing what did happen there. Possible. I think Richard Nixon thinks so.

But then after the convention was over, I think there was a good spirit. There were a lot of people angry in the Johnson camp. People were disappointed that he was running on the ticket. But then after a while I think—you know, there was an excitement about Senator Kennedy. I mean, he was young and handsome, and all of the other qualities that made him a good candidate. A lot of people were caught up in the fervor of that campaign, and I think it turned out to be an exciting campaign.

G: Was LBJ influenced by this, do you think? Did he pick up some of the—

V: I think so. This is my own speculation. But I think Senator Kennedy was a very attractive candidate, and he was a different kind of candidate. And there were some very exciting moments in the campaign, for instance the meeting with the ministers in Houston, which may have been a turning point.

G: Were you there?

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V: No, I wasn't, but Jack was. He can—Jack, I think, was doing a lot, so he can tell you about that. I wasn't there, but—

G: As vice president-elect, perhaps, or sometime during the course of that period, LBJ is supposed to have made the statement, "Power is where power goes," indicating that he could reinvigorate the office of vice president. Do you think he felt that way, that it was potentially a more useful office than it had been in the past?

V: Than majority leader?

G: No, than it had been in the past.

V: Perhaps, but I think he—as I said, this is conjecture, but I think he felt that the only—well, obviously, the only constitutional power is presiding over the Senate, and then I think he felt that whatever power that he would have would come from the President. Except, [that] one of his understandings with Senator Kennedy at the convention was that he would still have a say in appointment of federal offices, judgeships for example, in the state of Texas. This was something, I think, Senator [Ralph] Yarborough perhaps didn't understand. So I think he—it seems to me that what he was trying to do was to hold on to some of the power, certainly hold on to some of the power he had in Texas. But he was too much of a realist—I don't think he was really beguiled, fooled into thinking that the office itself had any power except for what the president gave it.

G: He also apparently tried to retain a degree of his power in the Senate in terms of presiding over the caucus and that sort of thing, but apparently was dissuaded from doing that. Do you have any recollection of that?

V: I don't remember that.

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G: Let me ask you about the visibility of the role. He was, presumably, a more visible figure as vice president than he had been as majority leader.

V: In what way do you mean that?

G: Well, even though he had been majority leader, he was one of one hundred senators, whereas being vice president, elected nationally along with the president, didn't it make him more of a public figure, do you think?

V: I don't know, it just seemed to me that he went out more, which I don't think was something that he particularly liked, going to more embassy dinners, for instance, and receptions, and that sort of thing. I mean, when you are majority leader, it is a pretty visible role.

G: You don't think he was more of a celebrity, more of a public figure as vice president than he had been as majority leader?

V: I don't know, I'm still trying to think in what way you could mean that. President Kennedy sent him on foreign trips, perhaps in that sense, but it seems to me that a majority leader has much more power, and that is what counts in Washington.

G: Was life more in a fishbowl than it had been before? Did Lyndon Johnson, do you think, feel that there was this dimension of it?

V: I don't recall him saying anything like that. I never heard him describe it that way.

G: How did the vice-presidency change him, if at all?

V: Well, of course I left in May of 1962. I don't know, there are people who say that they think that he wasn't happy during that time. I know that after I was married, that Jack and

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I were asked to come to the Ranch a good deal, it seems to me, and—you know, it's hard to—he never complained, to my knowledge. I never heard him complain about his job.

G: Did he like it?

V: He never said he didn't like it. If you're asking me my own opinion about it, I would say I think he preferred being majority leader to being vice president because I think being a legislator is what he enjoyed.

G: You mentioned earlier that he really didn't care that much about going to embassy parties and things like that.

V: Yes, I don't think he liked that. I don't think he liked dressing up in black tie and—also I think the kind of conversation that he liked a lot was talking to other men about politics. I don't think that kind of formal social life was the kind of social life that he enjoyed most. He enjoyed being with old friends and more informal kind of evenings, being with people he trusted closely. I just think he liked that much more than he did a formal dinner at the White House or embassies.

G: In reading some of his speeches while he was vice president, he seems to have had a zeal about civil rights that he hadn't had. Perhaps he was taking the same position while he was majority leader in the latter years, but there was not the emotion and the zeal that he seemed to have when he was—

V: And I think it was genuine. I don't know how to account for it exactly—can't account for it at all.

G: You traveled with him a lot and were around him a lot for the first—well, as you say until May of 1962. Do you recall any instances where he personally advanced civil rights?

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For example, there are stories of him calling the owner of one hotel in Houston, let's say, and insisting that some African diplomat be allowed to come. Do you remember any of those types of things?

V: I remember vaguely the story you are recounting—

G: I don't even know if the details are accurate—

V: I think he called Conrad Hilton, didn't he?

G: That may have been it. Tell me what you remember about that.

V: Well that was during his vice-presidential years, right? But I don't know who the diplomat was, I just remember someone was going there. I don't remember how it was brought to Vice President Johnson's attention, but I have a memory that he called Conrad Hilton and asked him to call the manager of a Hilton Hotel in Houston to arrange for this man to stay there. How far we've come! Gosh; isn't it incredible?

G: Yes. Let me ask you about his position as chairman of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. This was an activity that I gather he spent a lot of time with.

V: I wasn't involved in that. I don't know.

G: Insisting on employment of minorities in government departments and in defense contracts, things of that nature. No recollection?

V: I don't have any. No.

G: As you mentioned, he traveled a great deal while he was vice president. Did that sort of thing appeal to him, did he like it?

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V: It seems to me that he enjoyed it. It gave him something to do that I think he felt was substantive. And he tackled those trips, he approached them with enormous energy and enthusiasm.

G: Give me an example.

V: [Inaudible] being in Southeast Asia, touring these cities. I don't think—I wasn't right there when he ran into the camel driver, but he was just having—as you know he had tremendous energy, and he approached those trips like he was campaigning, to go around shaking hands. I remember somewhere along the line—I don't know whether it was on those trips or whenever he came back—he was talking about people in these countries, that if they could they would have traded with us, they would wanted to have been Americans, to have our freedom, our democracy. I think that was a mistaken view on his part. I think he thought they all—everybody in the world would like to come to this country. I think he honestly felt that way. He said it—“They would like to trade places,” which I think gives some insight into his view of the world.

G: Was he sensitive, do you think, to the differences among cultures?

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

G: He does seem to have taken a much more personal approach to diplomacy, as you mention, getting out and shaking hands with the people. Did he urge our embassy people to take the same sort of grassroots—

V: (Laughter) I don't know about that.

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G: I want to talk to you about each of these trips, but let me ask you first to talk generally about some other details here in the early part of the transition. Did he discuss selling the station at this point?

V: I don't recall that.

G: How about his housing situation? I gather it was in this period that they started looking for a new home. And he was living at Wardman Park, is that right?

V: Yes. It was called something else by then, I forget now what it was—Sheraton? I can't remember. But yes, I do recall they lived there awhile.

G: Why did they move from 30th Place?

V: Well, it was a very modest house. Mrs. Johnson was sharing a bathroom with her daughters, and they had taken this one room and—excuse me— anyway he had closet space, but nothing like what I think he must have had later on, but it was a very modest house.

G: Was the move to the Sheraton Park or Wardman-Park just a transitional move—

V: Yes.

G: —while they looked for another house? Is that—?

V: Yes. I can't remember whether—they sold it to Jerry Siegel, I think— and I can't remember whether it had been sold and they needed to get out because Jerry wanted to move in, or whether they had already bought Mrs. Mesta's house. Perhaps they were doing some work on it and wanted to have a place to stay while they did it—that I really don't recall why.

G: Anything on the purchase of The Elms? Do you remember how they decided on that?

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V: I guess it offered them what they felt they needed. I think they wanted to entertain some and their other house really was not suitable for what I think they thought—for the entertaining they were going to do. It had a dining room that seated eight or ten people, I suppose. Mrs. Johnson would be a better source of information on this, but it seems to me that they wanted a place where they could reciprocate invitations.

G: Did he ever come close to buying another house instead?

V: Well, I remember when Mrs. Johnson was looking, I think that they looked at a house very close over here on King Street. It was owned by Scottie, F. Scott Fitzgerald's daughter. Scottie and her husband lived just walking distance over here. That's the only one I sort of vaguely remember Mrs. Johnson mentioning. She looked around a good deal, I'm sure.

G: How about President-elect Kennedy's visit to the Ranch in November. Can you recall any details of that? The purpose of the trip—was it strictly social or did they discuss policy?

V: Let's see, was he campaigning at that time?

G: No, it was right after the election, it was about ten days after the election. That would have been November 16.

V: (Pause) I'm sorry, what was your question?

G: Anything that you remember about President Kennedy's trip to the Ranch to visit there?

V: No, the only thing I can remember now is his wife calling him. I don't remember anything.

G: Did President Kennedy seem to like that sort of lifestyle?

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V: Well, as I say, I did not go on the deer hunt. I've heard that he didn't like that, but I don't know that that was true. I don't know whether he liked it or not. I'd be guessing.

G: Okay. Now, the trip to Paris, the trip to the NATO conference. You went along on that. Any recollections of that?

V: Well, I think he had fun, too. It was a trip where there was some shopping and that sort of thing.

G: Did he buy any art?

V: I remember going someplace and he was looking. Probably, but I don't remember what. Most of his art was not memorable.

G: Really?

V: (Laughter). That's my view.

G: I'm told he would dicker on purchases. Can you describe that?

V: I can't remember on that trip whether or not he—I mean, he was a trader. You've heard the famous story—I don't know where this trip was. Jack likes to tell this story. I don't know what trip this was. He had bought some painting someplace in Europe, and he was trying to bargain with the painter, but the woman—and I can't remember the details, Jack tells this story very well—anyway the woman was too fat. [Inaudible] Anyway, the President said to the painter, "Take about fifteen pounds off that woman's ass." Have you heard this story?

G: (Laughter). Do you think it really happened, or do you think it's apocryphal?

V: If it didn't happen, it should have happened. (Laughter) I don't doubt it.

G: Did you ever see the painting in question?

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V: No.

G: I wonder if he ever bought it. Any other experiences of him negotiating for art?

V: No, I never knew what his criteria was for art, what made him like one painting better than another, or why he liked one painting at all. It seemed it was like taking a dart out of bag and you threw it—

G: (Laughter) Did he buy these paintings as souvenirs of the country? And did he buy them to reflect either local architecture—?

V: I don't know. As I say, I don't know what criteria he used for selecting a painting.

G: What did he do with the paintings?

V: Oh, he hung them all over the Ranch. I remember that large room off the side of the dining room at the Ranch. The walls were covered.

G: Did he give them away as well?

V: Yes, I remember after I was married and living in Houston, he went on that trip to the Scandinavian countries, and he brought back a painting which he gave to me, which I still have. Not hung. (Laughter)

G: Where?

V: Upstairs. Stored. Not bad.

G: Did he dicker in other purchases as well?

V: Yes, I remember once—the Christmas after Jack and I were married, perhaps. Vice President Johnson took us down to San Antonio to do some Christmas shopping. I remember we went to Frost Brothers, and the President was buying dresses for all the—his wife, daughters, whomever, women, friends. It was sort of late in the afternoon, five

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or six o'clock and they were serving him scotch back in one of the dressing rooms. I don't remember what his bill was, but—you know, it was probably Christmas Eve—and so if he had bought maybe \$1500 worth of dresses, he asked this executive of Frost Brothers—he said, "I'll give you \$1000 for all those dresses." I don't know whether he was—you know, he was trading in a ladies' department store! Jack was just astounded. He had never seen nor heard anything like this. I don't know whether Mr. Johnson was aware of the fact that the day after Christmas all of those dresses would have been marked down to half price anyway, so Frost Brothers was still going to make some money selling them Christmas Eve. But Jack was just dumbfounded that anyone would trade in a store like that.

G: Did he accomplish—?

V: Yes, as I recall I think he did.

G: How about on this Paris trip? When he was buying clothes there, did he also do some horse trading?

V: I don't know, I don't know about that. But I can't believe he ever bought anything and paid full retail price for it.

G: Did he like Paris? Do you recall his attitude toward the city and the people, Parisians, during this trip?

V: I can't answer that. I don't remember, frankly, being around a lot of Parisians. I don't know.

G: Anything on the London phase of that trip?

V: No.

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G: You've given some very good characterizations of him as an art buyer and things of this nature, and one thing that shows up a lot toward the end of 1960 is that he is spending a lot of time on the Ranch. He is going to a lot of cattle auctions, and he is either buying cattle or looking at them. Let me ask you to just talk generally about him as a rancher, and just your perceptions of him in this capacity during this period.

V: Well, he wasn't just a gentleman farmer or rancher. He truly understood cattle and what made good cattle as opposed to indifferent cattle, and he understood farming operations. He could drive around his Ranch and he knew if things weren't being done just the way he thought they should, or if something should be watered. He understood when the time was appropriate to plant. He knew how to manage and oversee his own operation. He used to talk about rich men who liked to play cowboy, and I always thought he sort of meant that he, too, enjoyed playing cowboy, but I think he also understood how everything should be run.

G: Did he view it as a business?

V: I don't think so, because my recollection is that he used to say that the only ranches that made money were sheep and goat ranches. I think it was mainly for his own pleasure. Being in that house meant a great deal to him, and having a place to go when he wanted to get away.

G: So often he is pictured as a very one-dimensional man that liked only politics and nothing else, but you did see this as another side of him?

V: Oh, yes indeed. I think he also was a superb businessman. I think he very much enjoyed his business life. He wasn't a man of a great many interests, I think; politics was the

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most interesting thing to him, but I think he did genuinely enjoy his Ranch and overseeing its operation, and he enjoyed business life too.

G: Something that really impacts on both aspects of that is the crash of his Convair, the company's Convair early in 1961. Were you out there then; do you recall what happened?

V: I was. Well, I was not downstairs, I was upstairs in my room. I went to bed at some point, and I woke up early the next morning and heard a lot of commotion, running back and forth, and agitated voices. That was when I learned that the plane had not come in the night before, and I think they were still searching for it.

G: There have been a lot of accusations about this whole business—why the plane was in Austin, why it didn't come earlier, and this sort of thing, and if, in fact, he had requested them to come when the weather was bad, or something like that. Do you know anything about the details about that?

V: No, I don't really. It seems to me that he had talked to the pilot, and had told him that the weather was going to be bad, and so if he was going to come he should come early to avoid the bad weather. I've heard too, that accusation that he told the pilot to come on. I don't believe that for a moment. I don't think he would ever have been casual with other people's lives, and with his plane, that just doesn't fit in with what I know about him.

G: Anything on the ownership of the plane that you recall?

V: What do you mean by that?

G: Who actually owned the plane. Was it the LBJ Company that owned it or—

V: I think so.

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G: —a leased plane?

V: Well, I'm not sure, now that you say "Was it leased?" That hasn't been brought out?

G: I don't know. It was an issue subsequently, and I just wondered if you had any insights on it.

V: Well, I don't. I was about to say that the company did own it, but it could very well have been leased, I just don't know.

G: Anything on the Kennedy cabinet selections? Did LBJ have any input into those, particularly on John Connally as secretary of the navy?

V: My memory is that Speaker Rayburn had told Senator Kennedy that the two most promising, talented Texans that he would recommend for appointments in the administration were John Connally and George McGee. I think I'm right about that.

G: So LBJ was not directly involved in any—

V: I would think so; I don't remember, I really don't. I can't believe that they wouldn't have talked to him about John Connally. I think that they would most certainly have talked to him about John Connally.

G: Did the Vice President help to advance that appointment after it was announced? Did he help with the Senate confirmation or anything of that nature?

V: I don't know.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview VI

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