

Mrs. Johnson Sums Up

By NAN ROBERTSON

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 26 — Mrs. Lyndon Baines Johnson looked back today over her five years in the White House and said that the "final, saddest thing" about the job was the friends lost through decisions she or the President had been forced to make.

But she said a woman would "have to be a clod" not to savor the magnificent opportunities and stimulations that came to a President's wife.

The First Lady said that the "pain" of the assassination of President Kennedy almost before the Johnsons' eyes and in their own state had colored her years in the Executive Mansion and heightened her sense of obligation to her role.

Mrs. Johnson spoke of the past, present and future in a 80-minute interview, held by a hissing fire in the Lincoln Sitting Room, a cozy antechamber at the east end of the second floor of the White House next to the Lincoln Bedroom (in which Lincoln never slept but had his office).

She was twice interrupted by her older daughter, Mrs. Charles S. Robb. Once Mrs. Robb burst in with her 2-month-old baby, Lucinda Desha. The baby, who looks like a "Buddha," according to her grandmother, had a pink ribbon tied in what must be the sparsest head of hair in the first family.

The second time, Mrs. Robb

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Mrs. Johnson Sums Up on the Joys and Regrets

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came to show her mother Christmas snapshots of Lucinda and Patrick Lyndon, the 18-month-old son of the Johnsons' younger daughter, Mrs. Patrick J. Nugent.

Mrs. Johnson, seated in a red plush Victorian chair, was wearing a brown woolen shift with a white cowl collar, and a casual woolen cardigan over her shoulders.

Mrs. Johnson said she was "quite sure" the White House had made her less shy because she had been forced to "study and to learn and to acquire some small measure of knowledge" on subjects she was interested in. People's enthusiasm carried her along, too, she said.

But she said that living in the mansion had made her feel "isolated" to some extent, with fewer and fewer people performing "the spur-of-the-moment acts of friendship," such as getting a call on a summer's evening "for a hamburger in the backyard."

When Mrs. Johnson was asked if she had lost any friends after moving into the White House, a look of sadness passed over her face and she fell into one of her frequent, reflective pauses. She fiddled with spectacles in one hand and then replied:

"Oh, I am sure we have. I cannot separate myself from my husband on that score. And that is the final, saddest thing to put aside. I mean, it is just a place where you have to make constant decisions and there is seldom a clear-cut, golden right and an ugly, for-sure wrong." She called the experience "deeply painful."

She added that despite the respect and admiration she had for the job of First Lady, "I just want to be me."

The President's wife mulled over the question of her "hardest assignment" and then said it probably was her 1964 whistle-stop campaign tour, in which she delivered 47 speeches in four days.

'Most Dramatic' Period

The tour, she said, was perhaps "the most dramatic four days of my stay here, and the most constant staccato of effort, just push, push, push try, up early and constantly giving."

She loved her daughters' weddings in 1966 and 1967. "I enjoyed those two weddings to beat the band," she said. "Poor Liz may have had high blood pressure and tore her hair, but I had a great time."

The First Lady was referring to Elizabeth Carpenter, her press secretary and staff director.

Mrs. Johnson was asked about her reaction to Eartha Kitt, the singer, who denounced the Vietnam war last January at a White House luncheon.

"Well, of course, I was scared and shaken," said the First Lady, "and absolutely determined to answer, no matter how ill-chosen the words coming out of my mouth might be."

"In essence, I guess I ought to say, 'Oh, Eartha, I thank you' for bringing front-page attention to a 'woman-doers' luncheon that otherwise would not have received publicity."

When the interview was over, Mrs. Johnson vanished into the family quarters.

But just as her visitor and a Secret Service man were about to descend in the tiny elevator that connects the



Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson at her desk in White House. She valued her opportunities there.

mansion's floors, she reappeared at the elevator's open door and said she had one more comment to make on the pleasures of being a First Lady, one of the most widely traveled in history.

"You come to know your country more, in depth, in a rare and wonderful way," she said. "And you wind up more in love with it than you ever were."

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEW

Q. Do you feel that you have changed in the past five years and, if so, how?

A. Yes, I do think it has changed me. It demands much of you and it is thrilling and exciting and a magnificent opportunity. And you would have to be a clod not to try to rise to the opportunities, not to respond. I had the great good fortune to—well, to absolutely love many of the things that were in my husband's Administration. Then, the opportunity too, of living in this house and learning from it and sharing it with a broad spectrum of the people of this country.

Q. Do you feel you have changed personally?

A. I am quite sure I have become less shy because it has forced me to study and to learn and to acquire some small measure of knowledge on the subjects that I have been interested in. And the enthusiasm you have and the response you get from people does carry you along, too. So in essence, I am less shy.

Fewer and fewer people do the sort of spur-of-the-moment acts of friendship that we have been used to all of our lives. I have often expressed it this way: They don't invite us over for a hamburger in the backyard at 6 o'clock on a summer evening. In a way that puzzles me because I don't feel the necessity for the barrier, and yet I understand it and hope that it will go away.

Q. What advice might you give First Ladies of the future?

A. I won't presume to pass anything on. I can only say of my own time here that mostly I have lived it—lived it, loved it, every day, and that for me has been the right way. If there is anything I'm sorry about, it is things I didn't do, the opportunities that I passed

up, and not the things I did do.

As for the criticism, I just have a certain toughness and resilience in part, and in part I just plain don't read too much of it.

Q. What were among the most pleasing times for you in the White House?

A. My personal good time—I enjoyed those two weddings to beat the band. After the weddings were over we gathered upstairs with just the kinfolks from Alabama and Texas and a few close friends, and each one of us counted our own personal vignettes of what did you see and do and we had just a great time.

And then I guess Christmas of 1967 was one of the most—but I have said this before lots of times and others will be writing it, too—but Christmas of 1967 was just fantastically glorious for us. The fact that we were seven, we started out four, and last Christmas of 1967 we were seven people.

Q. Did your feeling about Vietnam change or was it affected by the fact that in the space of a single year two sons-in-law were directly involved, went over? It certainly became more personal to you, because those you loved were directly involved in it?

A. You bet it does and like every other person who has got somebody over there, I am counting the days until they are back and safe. Your feelings are intensified, they don't change. You are—at least I am—on edge until next April. But I have an old-fashioned feeling that if my country is in it, I want my folks to be in it.

Q. What are you going to do when you leave the White House?

A. First, at the very head of the list, is just spending some quiet times with Lyndon and our children and grandchildren. You may have heard Lyndon say, as he has several times—well, he speaks in jest on how many miles I travel and he wants me to do something with him, or I am off planting a tree. Well, many a true word is spoken in jest. He is not entirely joking about it. I think he really would like to have me there to talk to a little more and to plan and to share some more time, and I want us to do that. And there are so many personal things.

Q. What about the busi-

ness, the TV stations? Might you go back to take a more active interest in those?

A. I will certainly go back to acquainting myself with what is going on. I am a complete outsider and don't know anything now, and I hope six months from now I will know more.

Q. Might you work in the library [being built at the University of Texas]?

A. That I will do. Just in the capacity of working with the director and the exhibit man in trying to bring to life the story of these times.

Q. Have you left any, perhaps physical, legacy during these five years? What have you left behind you that you consider to be perhaps an achievement that one can see?

A. As a physical legacy within the house, I have yearned, ever since I set foot in here, to add some of the American greats in art to the walls of this house. There is a policy, and I think a well-chosen policy, of limiting artists to those who have been dead 25 years or more. And so I set out to try to bring to this great, old house some other American painters of note, and I am delighted to say that we were able to add [several].

The other part relates to conservation, and the fact that we have left, I think, a physical legacy here of many more little parks that have been transformed from just a desolate spot with wild onions and a crooked bench, into bright, gay places, with seasonal flowers and some handsome plantings.

Then the major things, like plantings of entrance ways, the double row of magnolia and soulangeana, and then the other major entrance, the one out across Memorial Bridge and Columbia Island, where we have about 2,500 flowering dogwoods and a million daffodils.

Q. What about outside Washington, what do you feel you may have left us as a legacy?

A. In the first place, I didn't leave it. It was just a rising tide in the hearts of people. Maybe it is the affluence and leisure time that has something to do with it, but they just see the world around them, the need of keeping the beautiful parts of it to enjoy and trying to get some order into all of the sprawling growth. Given that feeling in the hearts of people, I may have been something of a little, tiny spur or catalyst to help give voice to this new climate.

Q. One President, I don't know which one, said something about when a man moves into the White House he loses many friends. Do you feel that you have lost any friends since you came to the White House?

A. Oh, I am sure we have. I cannot separate myself from my husband on that score. And that is the final, saddest thing about being in the White House, and it will be the happiest thing to put aside. I mean, it is just a place where you have to make constant decisions and there is seldom a clear-cut, golden right and an ugly for-sure wrong.

You just have to make a decision on which you can see there is more justice one way, you think, and a little less the other. But there sure is something on that side, too, and you are sometimes hurting people that are your friends, and that it is deeply painful to hurt, and they have their side, too, but you earnestly believe the other side has more of the right on them.

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Joys and Regrets of 5 Years in the White House



White House Photo

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Q. Do you feel that you

have gained friends, the other side of the coin?

A. Yes, I have, I think, had the wonderful blessing of getting to know many more brilliant and interesting, delightful people.

One of my favorite things here has been, when we have a state dinner and invite writers, artists and just old friends, I always try to have an hour in the afternoon when I invite five or six of them to come and have a cup of tea with me and just talk, and I have done that many, many times and it has expanded my life to learn about the variety of their areas of concern.

Q. Can you tell us what led up, as far as you are concerned, to the President's decision to withdraw on March 31, your feelings about the decision, your part in it?

A. Well, this decision had been in the making for years. There were several other times at which I thought it was. The only thing lacking was the assurance of about when to make it. He can explain it so much better than I could and I just wish he were answering that question. I think it just gets down to there is just 24 hours a day and just so much strength and brain power that you have, and he wanted, enormously, to carry this burden of the Presidency with his full capabilities and you couldn't do that and pour enough hours and brains into a campaign to win it.

The major objective, win, lose or whatever, was in trying to achieve a just peace and keep us here at home from ripping ourselves apart in riot and discord.

Q. When did he finally tell you that "I'm going to say this?" How long was it beforehand that you decided the time had come?

A. There had been a number of other times when, for instance, the State of the Union Message, I thought perhaps that might be the time. And this time—oh, I was 99 per cent sure, but I wasn't really 100 per cent sure until the words came out.

I'm sure that you could—well, he ought to express it for himself, but you can see how it would have complicated the need to get a lot of things done if he himself were a candidate. A certain condition of removal was necessary.

Q. Do you have any regrets or thoughts that the war became more and more the overwhelming concern and appeared to slow or even stop some domestic progress as far as social reform was concerned?

A. Well, I think you have to back off and get some perspective. Surely the war took more lines in the paper and minutes on the TV. But this other great tide surged forward, too, and Medicare is now serving—what is it?—15 million people a year.

And I will cry defeat when Medicare is wiped off the books and there is no more Head Start. And when all the several hundred conservation measures get revoked. In other words, I think the achievements of the Great Society are here to stay and to be improved upon.

Sure, there are some dead-beats in the world, and sure, it doesn't all work fine, but he just made his best of the fabric of the American people, that you could try to make possible for them more educational opportunities and more medical research that would help the lives of all the young and the disabled and make more secure the lives of the aged, that you could do all these things without reducing us to a nation of dependent louts. And I just don't for a minute think we are.

Q. Well, then, you think the achievements far outweigh the disappointments and concern about the war?

A. Yes.

Will Miss Flowers

Q. What will be one of the hardest things to leave and what might be the happiest to leave behind?

A. All these lovely fresh flowers in the rooms every day and the view of the Jefferson Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial out of the window of the Yellow Room, the infinite number of things that I should miss, but you miss them with the same sort of detached nostalgia that you miss being 17. I have said that frequently before, you just don't want to go on forever at any stage of life, as delightful as it was being very young and—I mean referring to being 17.

Q. What will be the gladdest to leave behind?

A. The knowledge that I have got to keep up maximum effort at all times,

physical, mental, spiritual effort. I shall just lie in a hammock and look at the sky and turn into a vegetable and read slowly, to some extent, when I want to. I do not want to feel that I owe living at maximum effort to any great job, no matter how much respect and admiration I have for the job. I just want to be me.

And then I will be very glad to get rid of this necessity for sometimes hurting and disappointing your friends when you have to make a choice between different alternatives. Not that it has been my choice, I don't share the role of the Presidency, but I do share the feeling that he has and I know he has had to make those choices.

Q. Did you have a special sense of obligation when you became the First Lady, so suddenly and in such a dreadful way?

A. I do think it has colored all the time since then. I don't suppose there ever was another President who came into the Presidency by seeing the President he served assassinated almost in front of his eyes and in his own state, and I think that has—the pain of that has colored a great deal since then.

My own feelings were that I owe the next years, whatever they were, months or years, quite completely to easing my husband's life and doing this great job to the best of my ability.

Now that sounds perhaps rather stuffy and dull, but it is the way one feels and perhaps especially heightened because of the circumstances in which we came to the job. There never was anybody who needed it more than my husband, I mean any comfort or any sustaining hand that I might be able to offer.

Q. What rooms in this house have the most meaning for you and the most memories?

A. The yellow oval room, and the Treaty Room, which I found a very grim and foreboding room at first, but which I have—no, it is so perfectly Victorian—which I have come to use a great deal. I laughingly call it my board of directors room. But the rooms that have seen so much of our life here are the family sitting room, which is simply the end of the west hall, you know, and the great yellow oval room.

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