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CLAUDIA "LADY BIRD" JOHNSON ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW XLIV
PREFERRED CITATION

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Transcript, Claudia "Lady Bird" Johnson Oral History Interview XLIV, 11/26/96, by Harry Middleton, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.

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CLAUDIA TAYLOR JOHNSON

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This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

- (1) The transcripts shall be available to all researchers.
- (2) The tape recordings shall be available to all researchers.
- (3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcripts and tapes.
- (4) Copies of the transcripts and tape recordings may be provided by the library to researchers upon request.
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Claudia Taylor Johnson 6/20/02
Claudia Taylor Johnson Date

by Patti Decker
Aaron Swett 5-10-2011
Archivist of the United States Date

Assistant Archivist
For Presidential Libraries

Appendix A

Attached to and forming part of the instrument of gift of oral history interviews, executed by Claudia Taylor Johnson, and accepted by the Archivist of the United States on 5-10-2011.

Mrs. Johnson's Oral History Interviews:

**Assistant Archivist
For Presidential Libraries**

May 26, 1975, with Merle Miller
June 25, 1976, with Merle Miller
June 29, 1976, with Merle Miller
January 30, 1977, with Merle Miller
February 14, 1977, with Merle Miller
August 12, 1977, with Michael Gillette
August 13, 1977, with Michael Gillette
August 14, 1977, with Michael Gillette
February 4, 1978, with Michael Gillette
April 1, 1978, with Michael Gillette
August 6, 1978, with Michael Gillette
October 9, 1978, with Michael Gillette
January 23, 1979, with Michael Gillette
January 24, 1979, with Michael Gillette
January 25-26, 1979, with Michael Gillette
February 27-28, 1979, with Michael Gillette
August 19, 1979, with Michael Gillette
September 2-3, 1979, with Michael Gillette
September 9, 1979, with Michael Gillette
November 13, 1979, with Anthony Champagne
January 4-5, 1980, with Michael Gillette
January 29-30, with Michael Gillette
September 20, 1980, with Michael Gillette
September 26-27, 1980, with Michael Gillette
February 6-7, 1981, with Michael Gillette
February 20-21, 1981, with Michael Gillette
August 10, 1981, with Michael Gillette
August 23, 1981, with Michael Gillette
September 5, 1981, with Michael Gillette
November 15, 1981, with Michael Gillette
January 2-3, 1982, with Michael Gillette
January 10, 1982, with Michael Gillette
January 30, 1982, with Michael Gillette
March 15, 1982, with Michael Gillette
March 19-20, 1982, with Michael Gillette
March 22, 1982, with Michael Gillette

March 29, 1982, with Michael Gillette
August 3-4, 1982, with Michael Gillette
September 4, 1983, with Michael Gillette
December 30, 1984, video and audio interview with Michael Gillette
January 4, 1985, video and audio interview with Michael Gillette
February 23, 1991, with Michael Gillette
March 4, 1991, with W. C. Trueheart
March 8, 1991, with Michael Gillette
August 1994, with Harry Middleton (six interviews)
November 5, 1994, with Harry Middleton
January 23, 1987, with Nancy Smith
August 18, 1987, with Lou Rudolph, Jim Henderson, and John and Sandy Brice
August 19, 1987, with Lou Rudolph, Jim Henderson, and John and Sandy Brice
August 20, 1987, with Lou Rudolph, and John and Sandy Brice
August 1994, with S. Douglass Cater
March 22, 1985, with Louis S. Gomolak
July 16, 1996, with Jan Jarboe Russell
July 17, 1996, with Jan Jarboe Russell

INTERVIEW XLIV 1960

DATE: January 26, 1996

INTERVIEWEE: LADY BIRD JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: HARRY MIDDLETON

PLACE: Acapulco, Mexico

Tape 1 of 1, Side 1

M: This is side number two of the tape made, oral history interview with Lady Bird Johnson in Acapulco, January 1996.

(Interruption)

Mrs. Johnson the last time we talked about this, we went right into the campaigning season without talking about your father's death. Why don't we go back into it and have you record what you remember of that painful experience.

J: It became obvious early in September that Daddy was not going to live, at least he was not going to be the man I had known since my very first memories. I went to visit him in the hospital, and Lynda and Luci and Diana [Tschursin, Mrs. Johnson's niece] were along, in early September. I do not know just when they decided they had to remove his leg. The problem was poor circulation. In those days it was called hardening of the arteries. Harry, are we sure I'm recording?

M: Yes, you're recording. Can you see that little--this thing right here?

J: Alas, no. Sorry about that.

M: That's the one that tells if you are recording or not. And you are.

J: So, my Daddy had always been in charge. All eyes turned to him in the community in which he was, and the family in which he was, when there was a problem, and he had always been able to solve it, to come out of it. Maybe not always happily for him, but always to the best interest he could possibly work out for all of us around him: mother's death, the Depression. Well, Daddy was a survivor and a ruler.

It was clear that role was gone, and I knew my Daddy would not want to keep on living in a lesser way, and so I was not as--I grieved for him early on and said goodbye to him before he died, and those last few weeks were just to be endured. On the other hand, early on, for six months or a year, he had been declining. I had been to visit him in the hospital, or at the brick house. Some of my best memories are when he was first put to bed of him talking in ways that he had never talked to me before, about his courtship days, his early days, with my mother. I was startled and delighted to learn of the effect that she had had on him.

I said, "Daddy, you have such a deep chest, and such big broad shoulders. I just think that has just served you so well in your life. You've had such good health and such a great physique." And he smiled and said, "It wasn't always like this." Said, "When your mother first got married, she bought me a set of dumbbells and Indian clubs," are the words he used, "and laid a quilt on the floor and taught me a bunch of exercises."

(Laughter)

All of my mother's family were just great followers of Dr. [John Harvey] Kellogg of Battle Creek, Michigan, on things like vitamins, which they called "vidamins," and eating a whole lot of green vegetables, also something that is now fallen out of favor,

sunbathing. But for years was much in favor. And so he just grew inches, he said, in his chest and shoulders. And he was a big, fine, tough, hardy physical specimen.

So, there he was lying in the bed in Marshall, approaching the end of life, and it was not too sad because he was not Mr. Boss, Cap Taylor, the person I'd always known. He did not actually die until later on in October. But perhaps you've got other things first and then I will finish with that.

M: Let's go into that.

J: On the time he died, let me see, when was it into October?

M: October twenty-third, you attended his funeral. He passed away on the twenty-second, October the twenty-second. This is on page 52.

J: So it took hardening of the arteries and slowing and finally, I guess, just absolute clogging of veins to his legs to that amputated stump area. Took over a month, close to two months, for him to really die. And this is the--when you are no longer able to run your world, just terrible things can happen. This was none of his fault; the hearse that he was riding in after the service and to the cemetery, the battery stopped, and this rather long line of cars following the hearse to the cemetery was stopped on the highway, and there is just something peculiarly poignant in that. Here was a man running for vice president and trying very hard to help the man he was serving, President Kennedy, in becoming president. And stopped in a funeral procession for his own father-in-law. I felt so sorry for everybody around me. There's nothing you can do in that situation except hope, and it's pointless to hope because people will excuse you for being very, very late at the next place or even canceling it.

So he was buried, not beside my mother, but in a cemetery called Algoma in Marshall, Texas, in the lot that will someday will be occupied by the wife of his later years, Ruth. And that cemetery--pains me to think about it. It's right between--a highway split. A piece of it went straight to Shreveport; a piece of it went the old route to Shreveport, and there is the cemetery right in between. Well, can't help those things.

M: Were your brothers there at that time too?

J: My brother, Tommy, my big, handsome, duplicate of Daddy, but so gentle and kind, had died the October before. There was a period of time in there where each October someone important to us died. And so Tony was there, and he is just--quite aside from the bonds of blood, the bonds of natural enjoying, liking, being amused by, were very strong between me and Tony, my younger brother, who was himself eight years older than me.

M: Because you were involved in a national campaign at that time, was there a lot of press there when your--at the funeral?

J: A good deal, as I remember. My eye for once was not particularly on them, but yes, I would say there is a good deal of press.

And right here I want to say one thing. I had the most beautiful poignant letter a week or two later from Mrs. Bobby Kennedy. And I remember it still. And those things do matter. I mean taking notice of the death of your friends' loved ones, whoever your friend is, if you write them a sweet letter, or go to see them, or express yourself about being so sorry that they have this pain, this loss, it's good.

Speaker Sam Rayburn was the very first telegram we received after the death of

my older brother, Tommy. And we laid that proudly on the entrance table where kin and visitors came in to pay their calls, along with all the other telegrams, and later on letters.

And yes, it matters.

I had so many opportunities to learn. I just wish I had felt that I had taken advantage of them. You'd finally emerge a much better person.

M: You then, after that sad and painful experience, you then resumed campaigning. One thing that does not come through here and I wanted to ask you about, what kind of campaigning did you yourself do during this time? Did you go out and speak on behalf of the ticket?

J: I still belonged to the early school that you sat on the platform with your husband and smiled. (Laughter) Sometimes you encouraged him to stop. (Laughter) You held up little pieces of paper that said, "Twenty-five minutes, long enough." No, I did talk. They were either very simple, abbreviated, word pictures of his platform, the points in his election. Nothing terribly arousing or strong.

M: Had you by this time become more comfortable as a speaker?

J: Oh, yes, much more comfortable. It was not then or ever my milieu, but yes, I was relatively comfortable, because it was easy for me to believe that those people out there in front of me were very much like me. And I didn't have to be afraid of them. And I tried very hard to look into the eyes of two or three of the people in the front row, the third row, or catch somebody right, left, straight in front of me, who I could make eye contact with, because--well, that, I think, that is one of the establishing of a rapport, of a point of communication with them.

M: How did you, during that process of becoming more comfortable as a speaker, did you do this yourself? Or did the President give you pointers? Or did you take--

J: Oh, he was always giving me pointers. For instance, he said, "You drop your voice on the last of the sentence. Don't do that. Sometimes lift it. Sometimes you need to drop it," but just sort of--well, he had been a former debate coach, and he liked teaching people; he did it all his life. (Laughter)

And Liz [Carpenter] used to say so many things that were helpful. She said, "Just look right out there at them. Just imagine they are all from Dimebox, or Rosebud."
(Laughter)

Those were two towns in the old Tenth District for which I will always have an affectionate remembrance. But you might have thought we were making fun of Dimebox and Rosebud; we weren't. They were just saying they are a microcosm of America; they are a piece of us.

M: Shall we go into the election itself now? Where were you? Where did you vote?

J: We voted as always in Johnson City. I do want to say one more word though. Somewhere along this path, something happened to me that has affected me ever since and has stood me in good stead as the wife of a president later on. I sort of fell in love with the different segments of this varied land.

I remember one time Lyndon and all the whole cortege of press and speakers and-- he and everybody that was helping him--went to, I believe it was in the Dakotas, and this was billed as a "bean feed," and it was very much like a barbeque, except that the main thing that you had to eat was beans with, I think, some pork in the pot. And you were--all

the dishes, other dishes, were brought by--salads and desserts and pickles and everything--were brought by women of the neighborhood, wherever it was. And this particular one, in either North or South Dakota way out in the country, the main thing you saw were tractors, lots and lots of tractors; it was a farm show. And it just reminded you that this piece of America is the bread basket, you might call it that, and they just must have--these great mammoth machines just go roaring across this rich, beautiful earth. And gosh, I wish I could come back and see it in planting time, and harvest time. And this is quite a phenomenon.

And then, in October, especially, we would find ourselves in New England, and we'd pass lots of stands, just bright colored with pumpkins and apples and corn, and you'd see an evergreen forest and hills and a church spire rising snowy white, and gee, it was easy to fall in love with New England. Never expected to. Always felt sort of standbackish about New England. I was wrong. (Laughter) Beautiful, and something to love.

And so, it was just a process I enjoyed very much, had lots of respect for, tired me out, felt infinitely sorry for Lyndon, because he had to make so many decisions so quick. This time, just, of course, for vice presidency, but in the later campaigns even more tough.

Well, now, what was the last thing you were talking about?

M: Well, I said once we get through the campaigning we ought to go to the election itself and record your memories of that and how you felt. Did you expect to win by the time election day came?

J: I thought it could be either way. I thought it was entirely razor edge and up for grabs. But I knew that I couldn't affect it. So it's just kind of like being in a big storm. You just do your best to stay safe and not make it any worse. And we voted, as always, in Johnson City. In the latter years, we have divided--there have become two boxes in Johnson City and we may vote in the courthouse or in the LCRA, Lower Colorado River Authority, building. I think in 1960 we were still voting at the courthouse, where Lyndon had taken me to vote the first time in, gee, I don't know, I guess it was 1936.

M: How was he as election day came? Was he tense or relaxed?

J: Yes, yes, yes. Very tense, very tense. And we--headquarters--right here we come to something that I'm going to have to research. I do not know. I find myself suddenly uncertain. KTBC, which was our family business, radio and television, had found, I believe--I'm just going to have to ask Cactus Pryor and then look in the history books. Have you any way of knowing had we finished the present building? Did we listen to--

M: I don't know. It doesn't show up in here so my suspicion is that it might be a year later, but I don't know that. We'll find out.

J: I think you are probably right. Since it was a very important time in my life, I think I should perhaps record it a little later after I have looked.

M: Sure, all right we will. Back to--I don't want to over dwell on the President's feeling at this time, but this was extremely important to him because his whole feeling was that his stake in this was that he could take Texas for the ticket.

J: Either he could deliver or he couldn't deliver, and so, of course, this was crucial for him.

M: Do you remember where you were to hear the returns?

J: Wouldn't take an oath, but I'm almost sure that we were in the Driskill Hotel in the Jim Hogg Suite.

M: That's where you were four years later, and I suspect you were on this occasion, too.

All right, let me ask you, let's move on, past the election, to the trip to Paris.

Apparently this was something that LBJ was doing as Senator; he was going to a NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] meeting. And it's unclear from the record whether he was doing it in his capacity as Senator or as vice president-elect. Do you remember anything about it?

J: No. I don't.

M: The trip to Paris, you don't remember anything about that?

J: I do remember things about it, but I do not remember

M: The chronology suggests that you went there for a NATO meeting and that you stayed at the Continental Hotel, and that while he was making a speech at NATO, you went by Christian Dior's boutique. And that later, you and the President, or the Vice President-elect had Thanksgiving dinner with some soldiers in Paris.

J: I am looking at memories of this. We just might as well--this records that we were at the Driskill Hotel. We voted at the Blanco County courthouse early in the morning and then we were in the Driskill Ballroom headquarters for listening to the returns. Nancy Hanschman was there. Nancy was very present in important events. In all of those times.

I remember very well how close the voting was, and at some point, and I think this was Liz's advice, and golly, I'm glad she spoke up and did it, because I think this is something that ought to have been done. Nixon had poured just as much effort into this

for himself as Kennedy had and we had, and he lost by a very narrow margin, as you would remember, and Liz said, "Somebody ought to say something nice about our opponents and wish them well." And I did. And Lord knows I felt it, because it is a grueling thing for both sides. And there was a lot of press there, that I remember, and you have that sort of all-of-a-sudden, slightly deflated feeling; you do not have to struggle anymore. You do not have to gather up that adrenalin from the very bottom of your resources. You just kind of can afford to fall apart.

M: After the election--

J: And Kennedy came to the Ranch, remember?

M: I'm not sure that that happened just now, Mrs. Johnson. You went back to Washington, according to this, on the eleventh, and President-elect Kennedy met you at National Airport; President Johnson stayed at the Ranch. Do you remember that?

J: I'm sorry to say I don't. But just as it is a measure of the wipe out, of the fatigue.

M: Of course. Yes--then I'm sorry--then on the sixteenth, the Kennedy party did arrive at the Ranch; this was his first visit. And so, he came with some of the members of his staff, and they went deer hunting.

J: Yes. (Laughter) Poor President Kennedy, poor everybody who has to adopt the ways of a strange community when they are running for office, and may not like those ways, but have to make out like they do. (Laughter)

And, predictably, he was given a hat, by the citizens of Stonewall, and it was funny I watched this all fall along because President Kennedy had a very courteous, nice way of accepting gifts and saying something nice and perhaps humorous about them. But

never actually making use of them, especially if it was a hat. (Laughter) Indian bonnets, western Stetsons--anyhow they went hunting and we had lunch, predictably, with the Wests, and the Chambers, and the Moursunds, and bunch of staff. And then President-elect Kennedy left that evening to fly on, I think he was going to Florida.

M: So far as your memory tells, was that a relaxed time when Kennedy was there?

J: No. (Laughter) If you'd been in a pressure cooker for two months, and you do not really relax after a campaign as I lived it, and as I saw others live it, until come sometime later.

M: Then it was after that that you went to Paris, on the nineteenth.

J: Yes. About a week or so later.

M: There is a lot in here about being at KTBC. And I don't know what that--being on the KTBC fifth floor, but I don't know anything--

J: Now, wait a minute. Where is it in there that we were at the KTBC fifth floor?

M: Page seventy-two. On November twenty-eighth, it says, "LBJ flies to Austin where he spends night at KTBC fifth floor."

J: All right, then I should go back and at least say that a large part of me, which is gasping hoping that the machinery would work, that we would be able to pick up all of the talks that we were supposed to and broadcast them without flaw, on the election night and from the Driskill, because we had just finished moving into our new quarters, that is, our business' new quarters, KTBC, Tenth and Brazos. An old building that we had gutted and done over from top to bottom, and had planned on the fifth floor, there was a sort of a penthouse, a very pleasant little place with an opening that gave out onto what became a nice little rooftop garden, two bedrooms, two baths, living/dining area and a kitchen.

And that was home in Austin for quite some years. Actually, this was October and November of [19]60, and it was really home until [19]80--that is, home in Austin. Home was always the Ranch after we bought it, but our *pied-à-terre* in Austin, until I, alone, bought a house in the late eighties.

M: I remember the penthouse on the KTBC very well. While we are on that, leaving that was something of a wrench for you, wasn't it? Leaving that apartment. I remember that you were very happy there and you would have stayed there without buying a house in Austin if you'd been able to.

J: I would have, but I was *wrong*. I should have had a house all along. I should have had a bigger and better house, but my sights were small because I just didn't want big commitment to things; I didn't want to have to run a big show. I was wrong; I should have, because I would have enjoyed it. Now I'm too old to do it. But--

M: A lot of names show up in here, and I would like to ask you, if you feel like it, to just have a kind of a snapshot memory of some of the people involved. I've never heard you talk about George Reedy, and what he meant to President Johnson, and to you, during this time. What is your memory of him?

J: Lyndon had a great deal of respect for, he always spoke of him as one of the "whiz kids." Apparently, there had been some exceedingly bright, young people who could answer all the questions, had acquired that name in the early days of radio or television.

M: Radio.

J: George was real, real intellectual, book smart. Not as street smart as Lyndon needed and would have enjoyed. And it's just sort of a sad page in our lives because Lyndon really

loved him and respected him and was proud of him. And then in the end I think it was quite apparent that George resented and was angry and hurt by Lyndon.

My feeling about why he ceased to be press secretary is because his foot. His feet got so wretchedly uncomfortable, he had to have operations and stay off of them for about--a long time. And a press secretary can't do that. And then, I guess it was the pain that drove him to drink too much. And I don't mean that was a lifelong habit; it wasn't. I think it was a reaction to a bad physical problem.

M: Bill Moyers.

J: *Aahh*. My feeling toward Bill was totally affectionate throughout. And so, I remember passing him in the office for majority leader. There was sort of an outer office where there were likely to be a secretary who greeted people and who was always on the phone, and one more desk, and at that desk sat Bill Moyers. And he would be dictating letters into a machine; he might, or he might not have had a real secretary there taking them. But sentences that--language that was eloquent and elegant. And, in the midst of the most utter confusion, everything except a swinging trapeze would be going on in that outer office, and there was Bill performing so beautifully.

M: Liz Carpenter.

J: I want to say one more word about Bill. I always was intrigued by the fact that he was a minister, that he had been. I don't think he ever had a church, but he had finished the course in becoming a minister and he had--I think he was ordained, and he was a Baptist. And that always clung, although he--I think it's true to say that he wound up in an extremely intellectual milieu, which is not the natural habitat of many Southern Baptists.

So Bill was always searching, I think. And I think it was sort of a lifelong, "I love you. No, I don't," relation between him and Lyndon, and I think perhaps it was more needful on Lyndon's part than it was on his. *My feeling is totally affectionate.*

Now about Liz. *Aahh.* (Laughter) Liz was just as much my friend and my fellow worker as she was Lyndon's. But Lyndon was--she was strong enough, and tough enough to stand up to Lyndon, and he was honest enough, and realistic enough, to know that she had *so* much to offer, even if she was sometimes abrasive. Even if she sometimes wanted him to do something that he was just too exhausted to do, or that didn't come natural for him to do. And he usually did it, and he might roar at her, but he always loved her and admired her, and me too. And very much laughed with her.

M: While we on her, let's jump ahead a few years. She had been working on his staff until you moved into the White House. Did you ask that she be transferred to your staff?

J: I think that she and Lyndon planned that. I would have, if I had been smart enough and if it had occurred to me. And honestly, Harry, I cannot remember. But it was a totally suitable arrangement as far as I was concerned.

M: Walter Jenkins.

J: Walter, and my heart hurts when I think of Walter. Walter is one of the best human beings that I've ever known. And so able, and all of the good Christian virtues. And Walter had lots of crosses to bear, known and unknown. And he was such a plus point in our lives. There was a saying around the office that everything winds up on Walter's desk. That's right. If nobody else could handle it, would handle it, everything--all the hard things finally wound up on Walter's desk.

(Interruption)

M: Horace Busby.

J: Horace, Buzz, as we called him, was real intellectual, and I feel sad when I think of him, too. Because he was so able and smart, but others in our life were more loveable.

Nobody could turn a phrase better, or--he was a very skillful man with words and ideas, and an awfully good friend. Physically he had--was plagued by some problems, such as overweight.

M: I'm going to put two names together, Mary Rather and Juanita Roberts.

J: (Laughter) Oil and water. I can't do it. (Laughter)

Well, you know we were served by a great variety of people that were just at different poles. And every one of them converged on Lyndon's pathway and put something great and useful and good and happy-making into the pot. And Mary was--nobody in my life meant more to me than Mary. She was the godmother of gee, Luci, I reckon. And she was one of those beautiful young women who went to work at an early age because her father and mother just didn't have enough means after she graduated from the university--well, anyhow, she needed to go to work and she did. She was just crazy about working, and she did it so competently. She worked for Senator [Alvin] Wirtz, who was Lyndon's early mentor and so much admired by me. And as long as he lived, which was until October of 1952, was sort of the captain of our ship. We'd check everything with him, "Should we do this? Or should we not?" and pretty much be guided by what he said.

So from Senator Wirtz, she passed to us, sort of. I forget just what year she went

to work for us first. It was, I think, in the forties. And she was a member of our family. She lived in our house *a lot* of the time, but in Washington, our home at 4921 30th Place, Northwest, had a third floor, which for many years was unfurnished except for a working bathroom and one or several beds for young people who were in the service passing through Washington or young members of our staff, and she was one of those. Always tender, easy, gentle, and yet, she would irritate Lyndon because it took a long time to tell a tale, to recite the events on which he had to make a judgment. (Laughter) And he'd try to hurry her, and she couldn't be hurried. And so that led to a lot of humor, and sometimes, I'm sure, he must have said things he shouldn't.

And on the other hand, Juanita was strong medicine and a *fine* person. She was meant to be an army officer, and she became an army officer, a colonel, but she stayed with us. She came back to us after the war--she was in the reserves, I think. The army was a big part of her life. She was married the first years that we knew her to Ray Roberts. Their divorce was one of--

End of Interview XLIV