

Preface to White House Diary by Mrs. Johnson

By LADY BIRD JOHNSON

I began talking my White House diary into a tape recorder at our home, The Elms, two or three days after November 22, 1963.

A little of it was recorded in hotel rooms on our trips, and in my bedroom at the LBJ Ranch, but the great bulk of it was done in a small room in the southwest corner of the second floor of the White House, which became a combination dressing room and office for me.

I loved that room. I put my own furniture in it—my blue velvet sofa from The Elms (the back of it is faded from the sun that streamed in the southwest window), two comfortable French armchairs flanking the fireplace, and a desk that has followed me through all of my three Washington homes and now sits in the bay window in my "forever" bedroom at the Ranch.

The walls were covered in the loveliest Chinese wallpaper I've ever seen. In winter, I often recorded sitting on the sofa looking at the fire burning merrily in the little corner fireplace. And in the summer I reversed up the chairs and talked into my machine while I looked out over Andrew Jackson's Monument to the Washington Monument—my favorite view, in all of Washington, often out-things better.

lined against the drama of summer.

Sometimes, I sat at the desk and looked right down into the Rose Garden and across to Lyndon's office.

By all odds the best time to record was from 7 in the evening till 9 or 10 or whatever late hour Lyndon came home to dinner. The day's activities were at an end, my staff had gone home, and this was "my time."

Why did I record it? I think for the following reasons: I realized shortly after November 22, that—amazed and timorously—I stood in a unique position, as wife of the President of the United States. Nobody else would live through the next months in quite the way that I would and see the events unfold from this vantage point. And this certain portion of time I wanted to preserve as it happened. I wanted to remember it, and I wanted my children and grandchildren to see it through my eyes.

The second reason is a difficult one to describe—it has something to do with discipline. I wanted to see if I could keep up this arduous task. In a way, I made myself a dare. And somehow if you make yourself up to a task, you will do it. The greatest help were the shorthand notes I had jotted down in my daily schedule book. Gradually I, the most unmechanical of women, made

My third reason for recording this White House diary was that I like writing—fearful labor though I sometimes find it—I like words.

As time passed there began to emerge a fourth reason, dimly felt, something like this—I wanted to share life in this house, in these times. It was too great a thing to have alone.

I soon evolved the system of having a manila envelope for each day with a mimeographed sheet in it on which my secretary wrote the day's appointments.

Then I would collect, or ask her to collect, two or three newspaper headlines of the day and stories that related to what Lyndon was doing, or I, or the children, speech cards if I made a speech, the schedule if I was on a trip. Or, if there was a White House entertainment, guest lists and menu and program.

Then when I would record—and it might be the next day or two or three days later—some of them a week later—I would have the material at hand to put me back in the mood and the spirit of that day. The greatest help were the shorthand notes I had jotted down in my daily schedule book. Gradually I, the most unmechanical of women, made

and learned how to thread it and change it, and hold it in abeyance while I thought my next phrase.

A tape recorder makes for a far more verbose volume of work than a pencil in your hand.

And so I left the White House in January of 1969 with a suitcase full of tapes, recorded over five full years and the brief six weeks or so of the year 1963, and the first 20 days of the year 1969, all in all a total, as well as I could estimate after it was transcribed, of about 1,750,000 words.

During the last year and a half, I have re-read it all—and sometimes smiled wryly at my judgments and reactions of that time.

I have tried to select from this mass of material days that would carry the narrative and convey the changing mood and feel and color of the times, hopefully significant days, but some quiet days.

Sometimes I have felt like William Faulkner, who is reported to have said to his editor when he was slashing out some of his favorite writings, "You are killing my darlings!"

The result is actually a "sam-pler" of my diary—a book of some 800 pages—using about

one-seventh of the material.

But the full diary—many golden days that I loved living and writing about, and others that I'm afraid I made sound tedious and dull—will be in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and will in the future be available for scholars or historians to peruse, for whatever little crumbs of interest they may add to the story of our life and times.

Editing was not easy. I have tried as much as possible to use full days but could not avoid using sections from others.

For the benefit of the reader I was told it was necessary to identify or give full names to people or events already familiar to me, thus intruding on the casual and sometimes intimate character of these recordings. This diary is throughout completely personal and subjective. It is the way I saw and lived these events and knew these people. It is, if anything, the story of a family in a unique set of circumstances at a significant point in history.

As I look back on those five years of turmoil and achievement, of triumph and pain, I feel amazement that it happened to me, and gratitude that I had the opportunity to live them, and strongest of all—out of all the trips that I made and all the people that I met—deep, roaring faith in and love for this country.

LBJ Ranch
August 15, 1970