

Off-the-Record Musing in '68 Recalled

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On Nov. 20, 1968, President Lyndon Johnson passed out gold bracelets and told several reporters privately that he had never wanted to be President.

The bracelets had the presidential seal on them. Seven women reporters who got them, along with two hours of presidential musings, had seen him many times summon aides to produce such souvenirs for impressed and flattered dancing partners.

This time, however, he had collected us from among the guests at a White House reception for heads of veterans' organizations. He invited us for drinks in the family living room upstairs.

Covering Routine Party

I was no presidential confidante, and it was by chance that I had gone to the White House to cover a routine party. But I sat next to the President, sharing a silver bowl of popcorn with him, and listened.

It went on for two hours. When he paused, we would stand, feeling obliged to leave, but each time the President told us to sit down again. Mrs. Johnson walked in and out, finally appearing in her bathrobe and slippers, and suggested softly that the guests might

want to get home. He asked us to stay.

What he was telling us—off the record—was that he had never wanted power, had never wanted the presidency or the vice presidency, and was pressured into taking both—much the same thing that he told Walter Cronkite in the television interview to be shown tonight.

He kept referring to himself as "we." To illustrate his lack of need to be President, he said, "Haven't we achieved everything a human can do? Do we need an airplane? We have one. The White House? We have a house we enjoy better than this one."

Speaks Quietly

He spoke quietly, looking at nothing. Once he suddenly raised the volume of his voice to declare, "I'm going to be in charge right up till the last minute," and it was startling.

When I felt I had to ask him a question, I said, "Mr. President . . . Mr. President" over and over until he heard me. The rhythm of his speech stopped, and he asked, "What's that, honey?"

Then, when he had answered my question by saying that he had wanted, most of all, to be Majority Leader all his life, he raised his voice again and shook his hand while he said that

he had tried to use his power for the benefit of humanity.

After he gave us the bracelets, he said that women reporters were more accurate than men and

added, "I wish everyone understood as much as you do." I remember there was some cynical laughter as we walked back to the West Wing press lobby, to get our coats.