

Wife in the White House

A WHITE HOUSE DIARY. By Lady Bird Johnson. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 806 pp. \$10.95.

By James Brady

What a simply splendid account Lady Bird has given us of Lyndon Johnson's, and her own, five years in the White House. There has never been, and perhaps never will be, such an intimate glimpse of power in its private moments. Lyndon seems forever to be booming through what Lady Bird calls "this dear house," shouting for coffee, herding people into the Rose Garden, inviting sixteen home for dinner at thirty minutes' notice.

Lady Bird comes through as a real woman, a real wife. She's no papier-mâché First Lady, all programmed responses and loyal, tight-lipped smiles. After one of the president's major speeches she notes, "too long." After another, "unhappily his delivery was not up to standard."

"I began talking my White House Diary into a tape recorder at our home, The Elms, two or three days after November 22, 1963," says Lady Bird in her prologue. By January 20, 1969, she had one and three-quarter million words. About one-seventh of that massive record is in her book. The whole diary will be in the LBJ Library and surely will become standard source material for historians.

Bird, as she calls herself, cops out only once. She skips over the climactic weeks of the 1964 campaign, pleading she was too busy with her chores to record her impressions of the crushing of Barry Goldwater.

Her May 14, 1964 entry reads:

I thought he ought to run, facing clearly all the criticisms and hostilities that would come our way, pacing himself as well as his personality will permit . . . and then three years and nine months from now, February or March 1968, if the Lord lets him live that long, announce that he won't be a candidate for reelection.

Mrs. Johnson makes clear she enjoyed being First Lady, loved "this great house," was stimulated by her contacts with world leaders, liked being there when the great decisions were being made. Yet she can complain about the abnormality of their life on Pennsylvania Avenue.

"I can't live in a cage and I won't give up doing with Lynda and Luci and Lyndon a lot of the things I want to do."

She recalls the evening in June 1964 when, after dinner, Joe Alsop urged the president to send troops to Vietnam. "No other honorable way out of Southeast Asia," the columnist told Johnson. Less than a year

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later, bogged down in Vietnam, the war now a bleeding wound, the president told his wife: "I can't get out. I can't finish it with what I have. So what the hell can I do?"

Inside the White House Lady Bird creates a nearly normal domestic routine. But in a remarkable passage she reveals you *can* hear the chanting pickets outside the fence, the president *can* hear what they're saying. "What a house," she moans. "What a life."

Loyally she comes to Lyndon's defense. "Bill Fulbright can disagree with everything that happens and he doesn't have to come up with the answers of what to do." When Senator Dirksen huddles with Lyndon over some controversial issue she sees the political enemies as "two brother artisans in government." And she quotes Dirksen: "You don't mind if we denounce you once in while, do you Lyndon?"

Bird is familiar and chummy with Harry Truman and Adlai Stevenson, two of her favorites, and with Mary Lasker and Frank Stanton of CBS. But she says a "respectful goodbye to J. Edgar Hoover," who appears bigger than life, brooding over whatever president happens to be in office. She admires Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago but "I would not want to put myself in opposition to that man."

Jackie Kennedy awes Mrs. Johnson. Bobby Kennedy seems to her tormented by his griefs. And in a delightful entry when Farah Diba of Iran is seated next to Lyndon during lunch, Bird hopes her husband is "enjoying the Empress . . . she's certainly beautiful."

Lady Bird is a southerner. She accounts his civil



rights legislation as among Lyndon's major triumphs. But she can agonize over the confrontation in Selma, Alabama, a town where she spent some of her early years, and remark somewhat waspishly that yankee newspapers rarely seem to record the progress, but only the failures, of integration in the south. She has a real feeling for rural America. Every little southern town seems to have its quota of "kissing kin." One night she finds Lyndon "crying quietly" over the tragedies of the Okies in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*.

All the time Mrs. Johnson is raising a family, mothering her daughters, meeting their beaux and reading their report cards. She admits "sophisticated" people probably think of the Johnsons as "country," worries what Eugenia Sheppard will say about a suit she wears on a campaign swing. When Lynda comes home from a glamorous New York weekend mother listens avidly to her tale of having seen Carol Channing at Arthur. And when Lynda meets Chuck Robb, Lady Bird notes that quite suddenly, George Hamilton's pictures have disappeared from her daughter's room.

The house itself has a personality in her diary. James Roosevelt reminisces about his father, members of the Adams family come down from Massachusetts and tell how the early White House was so cold and damp, Abigail Adams had to keep thirteen fires burning so they could sleep dry.

Martin Luther King is killed, Bobby Kennedy is shot and dies, and the lights burn late in the president's office. Bird tries to coax her husband to bed. Failing that she has trays of food made up. Abe Fortas falls to the Senate, the pile of letters from parents of dead soldiers mounts, the pickets march and she can hear them chanting inside the house. Lady Bird looks at a portrait of a haggard President Wilson in his second term and notes, "A president should have his portrait painted reasonably early in the office."

Lady Bird has written an extraordinary book. "This certain portion of time I wanted to preserve, as it happened," she tells us. "I wanted to remember it, and I wanted my children and grandchildren to see it through my eyes." She is being modest. Her *Diary* is a story for America. Part history, part family album, part the self-portrait of an exceptional woman.

When Lyndon was Senate majority leader, young reporters like myself confronted his office as a cave of horrors. Once inside you were either brutalized or charmed to death. As we waited to see the great man and to suffer his moods, Lady Bird would frequently emerge from the inner sanctum, smiling, laughing, a happy woman. You always had the feeling she had just been kissed.

Lady Bird's that kind of lady and hers is that kind of book. *