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BARBARA JORDAN ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW I

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Signed by Barbara Jordan on August 30, 1984

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78705

INTERVIEW I

DATE: March 28, 1984
INTERVIEWEE: BARBARA JORDAN
INTERVIEWER: Roland C. Hayes
PLACE: Professor Jordan's office, LBJ School of Public Affairs,
University of Texas, Austin, Texas

Tape 1 of 1

H: I think the first question I'd like to ask would be how did you meet LBJ and what were your experiences with LBJ?

J: Of course, everyone in Texas knew that Lyndon Johnson was a premier political figure in Texas. But when I was in the Texas State Senate--I served in the senate from January of 1967 until 1972 when I went to the Congress--Lyndon Johnson was president of this country, and I received a telegram at my home in Houston from Lyndon Johnson. The telegram was to the effect "we are having a meeting at the White House" or having several people to discuss the future of a bill which was pending in the Congress. This bill was regarding changes in housing legislation to infuse that legislation with a civil rights component. And this telegram asked if I would meet at the White House to discuss this legislation, and it concluded, "Present this telegram at" some gate of the White House.

Well, I was, of course, quite startled to receive a telegram from the President of the United States asking that I come to Washington to talk about anything! I said, "Well, I guess I will go." And I took the telegram--I was in Houston when I received the telegram--came back to Austin for the senate and showed it to my colleagues in the senate. I said, "You see, I've got an invitation to go to Washington." They were kind of excited about just the prospect. Now at the time, John Connally was governor of Texas, and I hadn't had very good relations with Mr. Connally, but here was this invitation to the White House, so I went.

At that time you would fly to Washington to Dulles Airport and then you would take a limousine, which is really a bus, to Twelfth and K Streets at the Albert Pick Motel or Hotel. Then you take a taxi to where you wanted to go. So I flew to Washington. I got the bus to the Albert Pick. I took my bag--I wasn't staying overnight so I didn't have much luggage, and I put whatever I had in a locker at the Albert Pick transfer point, got a taxi and went to the White House, presented my telegram and got in, just like magic.

I went up to what I now know was the Cabinet Room. There were other people assembled, people who were active in the civil rights movement. We sat and waited around a table for the President and the Vice President, Hubert Humphrey, to arrive. Well, as I sat there really at the far end of the table, I still said to myself, "Now, Lyndon Johnson probably doesn't know who I am or what I am about, and my name probably just slipped in somehow and got into that [list]." So the President came in, everybody stood up. He sat down, we all sat down, and we started to discuss this legislation, fair housing legislation. And the conversation was going around the table. The President would call on first one person for a reaction and then another person for a reaction. Then he stopped and he looked

at my end of the table, he said, "Barbara, what do you think?" Well, I just . . . in the first place, I'm telling you, I didn't know the President knew me, and here he's looking down here saying "Barbara" and then saying, "What do you think?" So that was my first exchange with Lyndon Johnson. I'm startled. I got myself organized, of course, not so that I wouldn't stammer, since it is not my habit to stammer when talking, and I gave a response and then this conversation ensued.

That was my first contact personally with Lyndon Johnson. There were others after that, but I would have to consider that our first meeting. After leaving Washington, there was a story in the newspaper, the [Rowland] Evans-[Robert] Novak column, and in that column they mentioned my visit to the White House and stated that I had impressed the persons who were at the meeting, including the President, more than some of the persons who were familiar figures in the civil rights movement. Now, when you see that kind of an indication in a national column, you know that it's a plant. That was a White House plant, so I would say that was an indirect encounter with Lyndon Johnson.

H: What impressions did you have of Lyndon before you met him personally? When he became president and you were in Houston or in the Texas Legislature, did you have any impression of what kind of a man he was after he became president after the assassination?

J: You've got to understand this. I worked very hard for the election of the Kennedy-Johnson ticket in 1960 in Houston. And I was very enamored with John Kennedy. When he was assassinated, I was devastated by that, and it took me a while to really focus on Lyndon Johnson the president. But once I got over my devastation and realized that this is a man who is large enough to care about all people and attended to that, I then started to feel warmly towards Lyndon Johnson. And that is the feeling which grew in me as he performed during his presidency.

H: Was that because of some of the legislation that he proposed as a president and became law?

J: You could say that a man who could exercise power on behalf of people with the aplomb and finesse which Lyndon Johnson could, that got my attention, and being now a fledgling politician myself, I was certainly impressed with how this man could get things done for people. That continued to grow in terms of impression.

H: The positive impression that you have of Johnson personally, was that feeling eminent in the Texas Legislature about Johnson while you were in it? Was there a ground swell with respect to Johnson?

J: We all loved Lyndon Johnson as members of the Texas State Senate. We didn't know him very well. Most of us did not have one-to-one encounters or contacts with him, but he was certainly well respected and very highly regarded by my colleagues in the Texas senate, and he was our number-one Texan at all times. That was quite clear.

H: In the meeting that you had in Washington, when you attended, I noticed in the book it mentions that you had the meeting and there were quite a few people there, in the biography [Barbara Jordan: A Self Portrait]. Who were some of the other leaders who were present?

J: I remember Dorothy Height, the president of the National Council of Negro Women. There was Urban League and NAACP representation there. I'm not sure if Whitney Young was there. They were people that I had seen in the civil rights movement in the past, and in terms of their names, I guess I remember Dorothy Height's name because I would remember the name of a woman who was there.

H: Were you two the only women that were present?

J: I don't recall.

H: Was it a pretty large group?

J: I'd say it was fifteen, twenty people.

H: What you discussed in that meeting, did it become, as you wanted it to be, a reality?

J: It became law, yes. It did indeed. That must have been the Fair Housing Act of around 1968.

H: I noticed in your efforts to be elected to the Texas house and senate, where you ran for the house I think first.

J: I ran for the house two times and was defeated two times.

H: Do you think the legislation passed under the Johnson Administration had an effect on the redistricting of Houston to the effect that it did provide you an opportunity to run in a single-member district?

J: That was the action of the courts. The courts mandated redistricting of the Texas senate, and that's what made getting a senate seat possible for me. Baker v. Carr, the redistricting decision.

H: Okay. Which would be a judicial matter--not an executive.

J: That is correct.

H: You had a fund raiser or something in Houston and there's a picture of you and Lyndon Johnson embracing. I think he said if you ever need him to come to your aid, he would come.

J: That is true.

H: So the friendship, from the point that you went to Washington for that meeting, grew from that.

J: Well, it certainly did grow from that. On another occasion President Johnson called my house and asked me to serve on a presidential commission. He was establishing and did set up a commission on income maintenance programs, and he called my house one day, which upset my mother to no end. I mean, upset her in a good way; she just couldn't quite handle the President of the United States being on the telephone at her house. When I walked in from some place, and she said, almost breathlessly, "The Ranch is calling," I said, "The Ranch is calling?" She said, "The President is calling from the Ranch." And so I got on the phone and I said, "Hello, Mr. President," and that is when President Johnson asked if I would serve on the income maintenance commission. He told me who else would be on it, and it was, I thought, a worthy thing to do, and so I did serve on that commission. That was a second conversation that I had with the President, when he did establish that commission.

Now our work product, it's almost now an embarrassment, we were so low in the figure which we set out for the minimum income necessary to bring families out of poverty, which I think was four thousand dollars. But we did do that, and it was the idea which was so important that the President was stating and setting out for us. Wilbur Cohen was a member of that commission. What we were doing was laying the groundwork for a minimum income guarantee for poor people, so that people would no longer be poor. So we did do that, and that was, as I said, an occasion of conversation with the President.

The President was invited to Houston for a fund raiser--not a fund raiser--well, I think we were retiring a debt for Senator Ralph Yarborough, because Senator Ralph Yarborough always had a debt. And the President came to Houston to speak at a function to retire that debt. I was involved in the planning of this dinner, and there was great discussion of who will introduce Lyndon Johnson. And when the President was heard from, he said, "I want Barbara Jordan to introduce me," and that's what I did.

That was the occasion when, after that dinner, Lyndon Johnson held my hand in both of his as only he could do and said, "If ever you need anything from me, money, marbles or chalk"--I'll never forget it--"just call." So when I decided to run for the Congress I said, well, I'm going to call it in. I'm going to call it in because money is needed at this time. And that's when I called the President, who had left office at that time, and told him about my plans to run for Congress and asked if he would come for a fund raiser, and he said yes. I knew he would because he wouldn't have said that if he hadn't meant it. He didn't have a habit of just promising people things like that. That was a strong statement. So he did come to Houston to this fund raiser, which we had at the Rice Hotel, when I was raising money for my race for Congress. We had a hotel ballroom filled with people. We kept it quiet that the President was coming, but when the word got out that he would be there, the President's buddies thought they'd better ante up, and they did.

H: Very profitable-- (Laughter)

J: Yes. It was a fine dinner. So I was standing there at the door when the President came in, and he gave me that big bear hug and that's the picture that you see.

H: Did you ever go out to the Ranch while he was here? One of the barbecues or whatever that he is famous for?

J: No, I did not. I did have an occasion to go to the Ranch while the President was still alive. My sorority, Delta Sigma Theta sorority, had its national convention meeting in Houston, and we asked the delegates from all over the country what would you most like to do when you come to Texas? And they said, "We would like to go to the LBJ Ranch." Well, the sorority then turned to me and said, "Well, you'll have to pull it off," and so I again called and asked the President if the Delta Sigma Theta sorority could come to the Ranch for a visit, and of course he said yes.

So we all got on an airplane and we came to Austin, and then we got a bus from the Austin airport to the Ranch, and Lyndon Johnson personally toured those thirty or forty women around the Ranch house, and that was an experience that they'll never forget. None of us will ever forget it. He took us into the nooks and crannies of his house on the Ranch, and I am sure that Lady Bird would not have approved, but he took us into his rest room. "This is where I shave," he said. But the women just loved it and we all just loved it. He just was a real charmer like that.

H: Yes. I never met him, but I did come here when they had the symposium a little bit before he passed.

J: Yes, the Civil Rights Symposium?

H: Right. I've got pictures of him, in fact, you too, on the stage.

J: That briefcase is hiding a picture I have which I took with him at that symposium.

H: So he was very accessible. You felt you could get to him pretty [easily], as accessible as a president could be to anybody, I guess.

J: I never had any difficulty getting through to Lyndon Johnson. I can't say that about every public figure that I've tried to contact, but I can say that about Lyndon Johnson.

H: I think he comes across real well with a number of people that I've had a chance to meet who had a chance to meet him.

J: Yes.

H: Then does Lady Bird, is she as accessible or as nice as he is?

J: She is the most gracious lady. I mean this very sincerely. I see Lady Bird periodically now. We serve on the Texas Commerce Bancshares Board together, and she is very

gracious, she is very accessible, and she is willing to be of whatever assistance she can be. She remains a very strong supporter of this school, the LBJ School [of Public Affairs], and we are the better for it.

H: In the line of civil rights, what would be your experience with--I know I think I recall--the struggle. I know you met some of the same resistance I met coming from Texas. I noticed in your book you mentioned some of those, when things began to change I guess in the sixties, in 1964, after Johnson became president or whatever. When you went to Congress did you have a mission in mind of trying to deal with civil rights? I know you were appointed to--I forgot what committee.

J: Judiciary.

H: Judiciary Committee. Was that your goal, to work in civil rights, or to just go and try to serve people from your district?

J: My goal was to go to Congress and be a good member of Congress and, yes, to serve the people of my district. But I did not see myself as representing particularly nor specifically the interests of black people. But I knew that whatever I did, that was representative of the interests of black people. You don't have to focus on that specifically nor stridently, you just have to be there. And when you are there, black people are represented.

H: I agree.

J: You agree with that?

H: I agree a 100 per cent with that. I like that stand. I'm not supposed to say very much on these tapes, but I like that.

Did you find operating in the Texas Legislature, I know it's different, but how was it different from Texas in the national Congress?

J: If I could have stayed in the Texas senate and been assured that whenever I got ready to go to Congress I could go, I would have stayed in the senate and not run for Congress when I did. But it was the 1970 census redistricting that made it look like a time that I could go to Congress, and I knew that if I didn't go then I would have to wait a long time, because we keep people in office in Texas a long time.

So in terms of contrast, I enjoyed being in the senate. Once I cut through the maleness of the Texas State Senate and their view that I was somehow going to be a--disruptive force rather than a helping force, when I cut through that and formed friendships--I mean genuine friendships, some last now with the members of the Texas senate--that was a very pleasant experience for me. We didn't agree politically on practically anything. There are thirty-one members of the Texas senate and there were eleven who were viewed as the quote "liberals" in a Texas mode, but I got along with them

and I liked them, and they were real folk. And you knew where they were, you knew where they stood. You didn't have to guess about that. Then you go to Washington. That atmosphere is so rarified and large that it becomes very difficult to really get down to the core, the heart of a person, where they really are, the reality of a person.

So if I were to draw a comparison and contrast, I would say that the members of the Texas senate with whom I had encounters were genuine, humane and real and loyal, and I would say that the members I encountered in the Congress of the United States had more of a tendency to posture and engage in rhetoric and spin a web or a cocoon around them so you never knew which face you had on any given day. It was not easy to get through to the heart and core and soul that I am talking about that I could experience quite easily with my fellow senators. Now, Washington is a different mix. There are thirty-one senators; there were four hundred and thirty-five [congressmen]. That's quite a difference. And so it is that difference which I suppose accounts, the difference in size, for the unreality of some of it. Now, of course in Washington I formed some close friendships, but not as many as I did as a member of a small body, the Texas senate.

H: In the national Congress, were the state members of Texas in the House of Representatives, did they form a coalition or some kind of a--?

J: Very cohesive, very cohesive. We used to have lunch together each Wednesday. That's a tradition which was started under Sam Rayburn. We would have lunch each Wednesday in what they called the Speaker's Dining Room, and Sam Rayburn started it and it still goes on. It went on as long as I was there and it goes on now. Now before I got there, a woman had never attended a Texas congressional luncheon, but when I got there we didn't have to pass any resolution. They just knew I would be there, and so I was there.

H: You've had opportunity to break a number of barriers I noticed in your whole life span. I noticed that you don't project those out as the first of this, and someone else picks that up. I think, based upon my reading, a lot of this came from your grandfather [John Ed Patten].

J: Yes, that is correct.

H: Would you speak to how you think what his philosophy was and how it affected you, too? At the first of the book it says that he kind of taught you to be independent and to be your own person. Do you want to say anything about how that has stood you in good stead to achieve some things?

J: Well, the good thing about the lesson of independence and being one's own person, which I got from my grandfather, is I never had to apologize for whatever I was doing. I was not self-effacing. Now, some people may say that that's bad, but I always figured that if he said that I was to be my own person, that I could just go out there and be it, which I did do. So I didn't look back and I didn't look around for excuses for non-achievement. I just decided that what one wants to do, one proceeds to do it. That can be a dangerous kind of an attitude to have, because I find myself wanting to lay that on everybody else in the world. Now, that teenager who can't find a job and say he's so down and out, I want to look at him

and say, "Look, you're your own person. Just get out there and do it." That doesn't work for everybody, and I have to realize that and I have to remind myself that it worked for me, but it does not work for everybody.

H: How would you relate your experiences at Texas Southern [University], not the Groovy Grill experiences but with Boston [University]?

J: Oh, Texas Southern gave me a general, good basic--I almost said remedial education. Texas Southern gave me a fairly good hand on the basics, reading and writing. I didn't do much thinking, and that was what was lacking, and that's what was missing. So when I got to Boston, I didn't have any trouble reading and writing, but I did have trouble thinking. I would say that law school in particular is a good vehicle for encouraging thought. And I don't know why I did not have much of an experience with that at Texas Southern except that I didn't have to do much thinking. I was doing all right. I could always make A's, and that's what counted, to do that. So it didn't make any difference whether I did any thinking.

H: That's pretty well said. I like that. Do you think the experience in Boston--are you saying that law gave you an ability to do a lot more critical thinking?

J: It does indeed. It does indeed. I recommend a legal education for organizing one's mind. It's good at that.

H: I think you've heard this before, I'm going to say it again. I haven't said it to you and I'm going to say it. I think that you really made every black person, and I think the majority of Americans, proud when you served on the Judiciary [Committee], on the Watergate thing. I know the night that you made your remarks, I think that if the ratings had been posted, you would have rated with the Super Bowl.

J: Well, I can only tell you this. Thank you for that compliment. But I can tell you this, that wherever I travel no one has forgotten that speech.

H: I think what you did on that was just outstanding. I think the people were able to see, to cut through all the malaise and other stuff in reference to what Nixon may have done, to get to what the law says and what we're here about, what we're about to do. After that happened, I know you were bombarded by people wanting you to please come and do certain types of things for them--

J: I still am.

H: Personally, how did you feel about it?

J: Well, I felt that I was participating in a very important historical event, and I knew that I had to, if I can get into the vernacular, I had to have my stuff together. And that I would not--I had never--you know, I wasn't the only black person on the Judiciary Committee. Charlie Rangel was on. But at the time, when we started the impeachment proceedings, Charlie would say, "Well, I know he's guilty. I'm ready to vote impeachment." I said, "You

can't do it that way. We've got to get through the evidence." He'd say, "I don't need the evidence." "No, we've got to get the evidence and make sure."

So that's why I patiently went through the evidence until I was clear in my own mind that that was the thing which had to be done. John Hill was the attorney general of Texas at the time, and John Hill said to me one day, he said, "I told people before you came on the television to give your statement about Richard Nixon, I said 'Barbara will have her statement based in fact and law if she has to go back to Moses.'" So I told him, "That's absolutely right." No one questioned that it was the right thing to do. Now, the letters I got were overwhelming. I'd say I got maybe a dozen letters from people who didn't agree with me. But you contrast that to the hundreds upon hundreds who said "that did it for me."

H: You were drafted as a candidate for president out there, weren't you, by some people?

J: Oh, some people tried to--people get carried away.

Now I don't know how many more questions you have, but I really need to conclude.

H: All right, let me ask you one other question. Your political aspirations, do you have any more political aspirations? Would you like to go back to the senate if it was possible? Go to the Texas house or senate?

J: No. I've done that now. I don't need to rerun my life. I need to just move on from this point, and that's what I'm doing, moving on from this point. I'm enjoying teaching. I'm developing into a pretty good professor, and if I stick around here long enough I'm going to be a very good one, and that's what I want to do.

H: I want to thank you on behalf of the LBJ Oral History Collection for giving us this very good interview, my first interview. You're my first one. I want to thank you.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I