

INTERVIEW II

DATE: June 10, 1969

INTERVIEWEE: CARL B. ALBERT

INTERVIEWER: Dorothy Pierce McSweeney

PLACE: Congressman Albert's office in the Capitol, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of I

M: In our last session, we had come forward to a point of time in 1960. I'd like to continue there with the Democratic National Convention of that year of which the potential contenders were John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and there was even a movement for Adlai Stevenson continuing in that year. Could we begin by your telling me what your activities were about the convention, and what you recall about it?

A: I recall the convention, but I was not a delegate to the convention in 1960 so I didn't go out there. I stayed at home.

M: Here on the Hill during that last session were you aware of any movements either to stop Kennedy or to draft Johnson and various activities like that?

A: I don't recall any activities along that line. I know that Sam Rayburn was for Johnson and Bob Kerr from my state was leading the Oklahoma delegation for Johnson. But I don't recall any real strong effort to stop Kennedy. It was just, more or less, a plus Johnson effort on the part of people from the Southwest, mainly. I didn't take much part in that convention because, as I say, I was not a delegate. I had been a delegate in 1952 and 1956, and that year for some personal reasons I had nothing to do with the races. I decided not to go out.

M: Mr. Albert, there was some talk that Mr. Johnson might recess the Senate during the period of the convention and then reconvene for a brief session afterwards, and this was thought to be sort of a political threat. What was your opinion of that?

A: Well, they did reconvene after the convention in 1960.

M: That's right, they did. But did you feel that this was--

A: I don't recall this making any threats to adjourn and reconvene, but it was understood pretty much that we were to reconvene after the convention, and we did.

M: I was thinking in terms of this being a point at which the various members needed to go

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back and campaign, of course, in their own districts. This would preclude it if it were any great length of time.

A: It wasn't going to be any great length of time, and it wasn't any great length of time after we reconvened. But we did reconvene, and I don't think we stayed in session very long. But I think we reconvened mainly to let Kennedy try to put through a bill or two or to make an issue or two, because he was then the nominee, and of course Johnson was the Vice Presidential nominee. Kennedy tried to put through Medicare, I believe, at that time, and Bob Kerr opposed it, and it was defeated. He took the issue into the campaign, and I think it helped him.

M: Did you hear of any preconvention consideration for Mr. Johnson as the Vice Presidential possibility?

A: No, I didn't. I didn't expect that he would run for Vice President at the time because of his strong position in the Congress. He'd be giving up a lot of political power to move to the Vice Presidency, because he was the undisputed leader in the Senate and had strong control of the Senate. I think his principal aides were Senator Russell and Bob Kerr in the Senate. Then of course on the House side he had Mr. Rayburn.

M: What was your opinion of his accepting the number two position?

A: I think it was very good. I was glad that he did from the standpoint of carrying Texas and winning the election. It would have been very difficult to have won had he not been the Vice Presidential nominee, in my opinion.

M: Mr. Albert, even so, I don't believe that in this election that the Democratic ticket carried Oklahoma.

A: No, it didn't.

M: What was your assessment of the reasons behind this?

A: I think the main reason at that stage of the game was--probably the swinging issue was the religious issue. Oklahoma had not yet become accustomed to Roman Catholics in high places, and there'd been a lot of mythology about what might happen if we got a Catholic President. I think that persuaded a lot of people, but Kennedy would easily have carried Oklahoma the second time. We've made such a complete change in our thinking on that issue in Oklahoma in recent years. For instance, it used to be said that a Republican would never be governor of Oklahoma, and that a Catholic would never be governor of Oklahoma, that an oil man would never be governor, that an Ivy Leaguer would never be governor. Well, our present governor is a graduate of Princeton in the oil business; he was born in Ohio; and he's a Roman Catholic; and he's a Republican. So I think Kennedy's

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years in the White House allayed for all time any suspicion about the religious issue on the part of a great many people in Oklahoma.

M: Did you have much contact with Mr. Johnson as Vice President?

A: Quite a bit, yes. He attended all the Tuesday morning breakfasts, and I attended all of them. He came to the board of education quite frequently, and I saw him there. He came over to my office a few times here. After I became Majority Leader, I saw him quite frequently.

M: And this was in regard to legislation?

A: Every way. Socially and business--everything. I was out at his home here in Washington that they had bought, I think, just after he became Vice President--a large home out northwest. I've been out there many times. So I saw him both socially and on business quite frequently, usually several times a week--three or four times a week.

M: There is a great deal written about Mr. Johnson holding the position of Vice President. Did he ever discuss any frustration with the office and its lack of power?

A: No, he didn't to me. He never mentioned that at all, and I never heard him discuss it in the presence of anybody. I never heard him mention it at the board of education. He adopted an attitude of yielding completely to the President, I'd say, on nearly everything. He didn't try to frustrate the President. Once or twice he told me that he thought that certain things in the Administration were not going as they should have, but it was very private. I never did hear him say anything about the President personally.

M: Did he ever mention his relations with President Kennedy and other members of his staff?

A: No, not to me. He never did. He seldom spoke up. I don't think at the breakfasts with the President, I don't think he spoke up five times the entire time. I only heard him--one time he spoke up for the space program. That's the only incident I remember, unless the President would ask him something--his having said anything.

M: Do you recall some of the occasions that you did meet with him and deal with either legislation that was currently before the Congress or other issues of the day?

A: He didn't discuss most of the issues very much at that time. He would talk about what we should do with Mr. Rayburn and me. But usually he spoke about strengthening the party organization, and what he could do. He went out and spoke a good many times while he was Vice President. He spoke in Oklahoma, I think, twice. He did often say that we had to have a progressive front as a party, or we would not be able to beat the Republicans. But he seldom discussed the details of legislation with me. I don't know whether he did

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with anybody else or not. I doubt it seriously. I remember one little incident, of course, that was very strange. I don't know whether I should even tell this or not.

M: Please do.

A: We always met in the White House on Tuesday mornings, and we usually went to the--I think it was the Blue Room--one of the rooms there and assembled there; and then went across the hall on the first floor to breakfast. I got down there a little early one morning, the traffic was heavy and some of them were late. The room was in use--the Blue Room. Something was going on there, but there's a little room just as you go in the front door of the White House. There's a little sideroom where ushers or police or service or something, a small room with a telephone. So just as I looked into the Blue Room and saw I couldn't go in there, the President came up--President Kennedy. He said, "Let's go over in this room." He was down early, too. So we went in there. Pretty soon the telephone rang. Of course, it was for the police, and he answered it. He said, "Hello." He laughed and he said, "Who do you mean--Smathers?"

And they said, "No."

I said, "What's the matter?"

He said, "Well, the police at the front gate said the wild man's on his way in," and I asked him if it was Smathers. And he said, 'no, it was the Vice President.'" They didn't know it was the President that had answered the phone. I don't know how that happened, but maybe he was in a hurry or something, and he had just scolded the police. I don't know, but I remember that incident.

M: Do you recall any other incidents like that? These are very interesting asides, I think, during his Vice Presidential years.

A: No, I don't remember anything else of that sort that happened during his Vice Presidential years. But when they were kidding him about his fast driving in Texas--this sort of harkened back to me--this incident.

M: Mr. Albert, the Congress under Kennedy was said to be uncooperative and unproductive, and they used a few other adjectives in reference to the fact that the legislative program, the Administration's program, was blocked in many ways in an attempt to get it through Congress. What was your assessment of this?

A: I didn't have that feeling. Actually, we were just getting ready to move in a big way, I think, about the time the President was killed. I think we would have done quite a bit. I don't recall anything of that sort as far as I was concerned and as far as the Speaker was concerned and the Vice President and Mansfield. We were one hundred percent in

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cooperation with President Kennedy and tried to help him on every program. Now, he did lose his Medicare fight again because that was a close vote in the Senate. Bob Kerr was very strong at that time. He would not yield on that issue. He got off to a slow start in some areas, but I think on the whole Congress was quite cooperative. It was slow, but I think it was quite cooperative--at least the Democrats. I don't recall specific things about it. I know we were about ready to take up the Agriculture Bill, which would have been a major test, when he died. It would have been difficult to have passed it. It was difficult anyway in spite of his assassination and the effort that President Johnson put into it. But I don't recall any strong resistance in Congress. The Republicans were opposed to his program pretty much, and some of the Southern Democrats, but my recollection of it is that it was a fairly normal period. I haven't look back over those years recently to see what we passed and what we didn't pass. My judgment may be marred by just not having my chronology in shape. I may not remember just exactly what we did those two years or three years. What were some of the things he failed on! I don't recall his failing on anything except Medicare.

M: Most of his legislative packages didn't go through, I think, along the lines that he wanted them to during that period.

A: That's often true. I don't recall.

M: Was Mr. Johnson at any point that you were aware of helpful in aiding the Administration since he knew the Congress so well?

A: He helped the Administration on every issue. Of course, he was no longer leader of the Senate, and his contacts were confined to areas more than they had been when he was leader of the Senate. There was no need for him to do much in the House. Mr Rayburn and he saw eye-to-eye on most things, and he just left it to Mr. Rayburn. For the Texas delegation, for instance, Mr. Rayburn had just as good contact with them as he had. They are often a swing delegation in a tight vote, you know.

But I don't know whether he talked to Bob Kerr about Medicare or not. He talked to me about it, and he asked me whether he should mention it in a speech in Oklahoma after Bob Kerr had died. And I said, "Sure." He made a strong pitch for it at a Democratic fund-raising banquet in Oklahoma City, although he wondered whether it might upset the Kerr family. But it didn't, I don't think. They knew he had his own ideas. I think he probably talked to Kerr about it, but he never did say whether he did or not, and Kerr never did tell me whether he did or not.

M: How would you assess Mr. Kennedy's political standing at this point in time in 1963, say, prior to his assassination?

A: He was very popular in Oklahoma. He had overcome the handicap politically then of being

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a Catholic. He came to my district and made a speech--there's a picture of him up there, top picture--and he had a tremendous crowd. I think he would have carried Oklahoma had he run for reelection. There isn't any question about it. There was a big change in his image. He was personally very popular with the people, I think, across the country pretty much. They liked him, and they considered him attractive. He looked good on television and all those things, so I think he was politically a plus for the Democratic party once he won the election. It was very difficult for him to win. He overcame terrific handicaps to win. There was no way of knowing. I think the polls showed him to be pretty strong about the last few months of his life, and a lot of Democratic leaders across the country were angry at Democrats who didn't support him on most of his issues.

M: Mr. Albert, you're from the same part of the country geographically. Was your assessment of his forthcoming--if it had happened, his election in 1964--did you feel that it was going to be a close election?

A: In 1964?

M: Yes, sir.

A: If Kennedy had been--?

M: Yes, sir.

A: I thought he would win much easier than he did the first time, and I didn't think he'd have a major problem winning the second term. I don't think he would have.

M: Were you aware of any talk of changing the Vice Presidential spot?

A: No. I never heard that at all. I've heard it since he died, but if there was any such talk it certainly wasn't made in my presence. I don't know whether it was or not, I've never heard it except later. I heard that some people thought that there might be a new Vice Presidential candidate. I doubt that. I would think that the balance was just about what the President would want, and I couldn't imagine him changing.

M: Mr. Albert, of course in November of 1963 Jack Kennedy's assassination occurred, and this immediately put Johnson in the number one spot. There were many people that he spoke with immediately after this assassination, just after he had assumed the Presidency. Did you become involved in any of these conversations, and if you did, could you tell me a little about them?

A: What was that now?

M: Immediately after the assassination, Mr. Johnson talked to a great many of the political

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leaders when he returned here to Washington. I was wondering if you had been--

A: I talked to him frequently after he came back to Washington. I met the plane and went with him back to the White House, and I was one of--you see pictures going from the old Executive Office Building across--I suppose there were about seven or eight or ten people with him. I remember Homer Thornberry was one of them. I was one of them. We went over to the White House with him. I went over the very first time he went to the White House after he became President.

M: Could you tell me a little bit about what you recall about that evening, and what was said?

A: There wasn't much talking that evening. Everybody was sort of still in a state of shock. We drove from the airplane at Andrews Field where it landed back to the White House. I think we drove in under the Executive Office Buildings there. Then we walked from there across the lot over to the White House, entered the west side--is that the West?

M: Between the EOB, and the--

A: on the west side, yes. We entered that little side door there. We went in and sat down and just talked for a few minutes. The President didn't say much. He said very little that night. I stayed there until we broke up. Everyone was still in a state of shock, because we'd seen them take President Kennedy's casket off the plane and load it onto a truck or something, and it was very sad. The only thing that the President told me later about that evening that he was walking across there--I supposed Homer Thornberry was about as close to him as anybody in the Texas delegation, maybe closer. He was very fond of Homer. Homer spent a lot of time with him. He said that he made up his mind as we walked toward the White House there that from then on he was going to forget his political career, he was going to call the shots as he saw them. He was very quiet. He didn't talk at all walking across there. I remember that. I remember him telling me that a little later.

M: In the days immediately following there were several meetings of Congressional leaders.

A: Yes.

M: Were you among some of those?

A: Oh, yes, I was invited down there every time he had a meeting unless he just had something with one of the committee chairman. But normally I was invited to all the meetings at the White House.

M: Could you tell me a little bit about your activity in regard to these meetings and what happened in some of these right after the assassination?

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A: Right after the assassination and after the funeral, we had a meeting and he said we had to take inventory. It was late in the year, you know. We were wanting to adjourn as soon as possible. I told him that I thought it was the time, and he agreed, to pass the Agriculture bill, which looked like it could not pass at one time. So that was his first big effort, and we passed it, and he was able to sign that bill into law. He followed the Kennedy proposal which, of course, was Orville Freeman's right down the line as modified by the House committee and the Senate committee to pass the bill, and he signed it. That was a major effort. He put an awful lot into it, and so did I, and so did everybody else.

M: This carried the section on the wheat bill, didn't it?

A: Yes.

M: The export of the wheat?

A: Yes.

M: To the Russians. Could you tell me a little bit about the tactics and strategy that were used to get this measure through the Congress?

A: We just made it a major man-to-man lobbying campaign. We talked to every member of the House on our side, just one by one. I would report back to him and give him the name of somebody that we were having difficulty with, and he would try another approach, and so would I. But he and I worked harder on the bill than anybody. Well, the Speaker worked hard on it too, but of course the Speaker wasn't as directly concerned with the farm program as I was. I worked day and night, and Larry O'Brien worked hard too. I'd say Larry, the President, and I are the ones that really did most of the work. Larry called me one time about 8 o'clock Saturday night, I think it was, and he said, "What are you doing."

I said, "I'm trying to get hold of some members on the farm bill." He laughed and said he was doing the same thing.

M: Did you feel that Mr. Johnson thought that this was going to be his first test as President and that that was part of the--

A: I don't know. It was a dangerous test because the bill was beaten. As far as I was concerned, I admired his courage in making that his first test because he could have been beaten on it. He didn't pick an easy one. He picked the hardest one we had before us as his first test--because we had no more difficult bill than that one before us in that whole Kennedy period.

M: I believe in that final night of passage--didn't the House go into rather late sessions to get

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it through?

A: Yes, I think so. Was that the year that we had the foreign aid problem? I think it was. I remember that one. That was a very frustrating experience. We'd come down, and Cannon had been in a war with the Senate Committee on Appropriations. He wouldn't meet with them unless they met on the House side, and he wouldn't take calls from President Kennedy. I personally went around to try to get him to take a call from the President. He'd say: "I'm just a little two-bit somebody. I'm too small to be talking to the President of the United States." He never would take the call, and we couldn't get Mr. Cannon to move. Congressman Passman was complaining about something in the foreign aid bill, and Cannon was backing him up. But our real problem came just before Christmas. We didn't have a quorum of the Rules Committee in town. We had met with Halleck who was then Republican leader to try to get some help from him, and he wouldn't do it. And the last member of the Rules Committee--I think it was Allen Smith on the Republican side left town. So there wasn't a Republican around, and we didn't have a quorum. We had some Democrats away. We went down to the White House, and we stayed down there till the early hours of the morning calling, trying to get members back that were absent. The Speaker tried to get Dick Bolling back. He didn't get him back. Finally, I got on the phone with Bill Colmer. Bill was at the hospital with his wife, but he finally decided that he would come back. Bill was against the bill, but he would come back to help establish a quorum. So he got in a plane and flew through a snowstorm that night to get back up here, and we had a quorum the next morning. We got the rule--I think we passed it the twenty-third of December. The Senate didn't finally pass it until the twenty-ninth of December, so we didn't actually adjourn until I think the twenty-ninth or thirtieth of December. We were ready to come back for the next session just after we adjourned.

M: What do you recall about Mr. Johnson's activity in this?

A: We were all in the White House. We were in the President's office, and we were all calling everywhere we could call--and the White House staff, everybody involved, calling one after another. We were having trouble getting people. You know, it was just before Christmas, and it was hard to get hold of them. But we just stayed there until we--it must have been 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning when we broke up and finally had enough commitments to get that bill out.

M: Was Mr. Johnson using his insight in the Congress to sort of call the shots on who to get in touch with?

A: Of course, there was such a limited number that we all knew who we had to call. All we needed was about two members, I think. We called them all. We called every member. I don't remember anybody particularly quarterbacking the operation because it was such a small operation in terms of numbers. We called everybody on the committee--every

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Democrat. I think we even called a Republican or two but not successfully. But the President talked to lots of members too. But principally the Speaker and I did the talking to members that night, I think. I don't remember all the details, but I do remember that Colmer was the one that gave us the quorum finally late at night.

M: During this period, late 1963 through 1964, do you recall some other occasions, what other bills come to mind that you worked closely with Mr. Johnson?

A: Every bill from then on--just about every bill. I don't recall any bill that came up that was controversial that I didn't work closely with the President and with Larry O'Brien, who was head of the liaison staff down there and with his assistants. They all worked hard.

M: Let me kind of skip ahead here. This period, 1964 to 1965--I'll go back to the election--was particularly noted for its Congressional activity. What was your assessment of Mr. Johnson's relationship with the Congress during this period?

A: Well, it was very good, I would say, on the whole. Some Congressmen thought he was too much an arm-twister, and there was some complaining about that. But all the Congressmen recognized that his great talent was his tenacity. He wouldn't turn loose, and he would never stop. Once you passed a bill, he'd congratulate you, but he wouldn't let you go without talking about the next one which he was wanting to get through. He never let up all the time he was in the White House. I think that was his really great talent, his ability to get hold and stay. He never quit--very resourceful about contacting people, very quick on his feet.

M: Before I ask you about some of the bills in that period, let me ask you what your activities and involvement were in the 1964 campaign and election.

A: First of all, I was--the Republican convention came before ours. And my wife and little boy and I decided to go up to Canada, so we drove to Nova Scotia and then to Quebec. We didn't leave word with our office where we were going to go--didn't tell anybody where we were going. We just decided to go and get away from the office because never have I ever left--even when I told my staff not to bother me, never has there been a time when something didn't come up that they thought was important enough to cut in on me. So this time we just didn't tell them where we were going. We took off.

Well, we were in Quebec, and I was invited out to dinner with a boy named Paul Bouchard, who is a professor at LaValle University--a French-Canadian that had gone to Oxford with me as a Rhodes scholar. We called him when we got up@there, and he invited us to go out to his club. We were in a hotel room there, and my wife was in the bedroom getting ready to go out. My boy and I were out in the living room listening to television. It was coming on French and English. Pretty soon a newscast came on, and right at the end of the newscast, the announcer said, "The Canadian Royal Mounted Police

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are endeavoring to locate Congressman Carl Albert with license plate number PB827 driving a 1964 Thunderbird, who is believed to be in Canada. Anybody knowing anything about the whereabouts of Carl Albert will please immediately notify the Royal Canadian Mounted Police." My boy nearly fell in. I thought, my God, what have I done!

So I called the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and they said, "The White House in Washington, D.C., is trying to get hold of you."

And I said, "Is that so?"

They said, "Yes. Would you please call them. We've been looking for you. We had people looking for you in Halifax. We found that you had been there. We found where you had registered. We checked all the hotels in Halifax. We were trying everywhere, and they didn't know where you had gone from there, but they assumed you were still in Canada." Well, my office had not given them this information at all. They didn't even know, but they had called McAlester, Oklahoma, and found out what my auto license tag was. My staff didn't even know that. They checked me down, and they had called the FBI and put all the police departments in this part of the country. So I called, and the President was on the line. He said, "Boy, you sure are hard to find. I've been trying for hours to get hold of you."

I said, "I didn't think you'd ever find me, or anybody else." He said, "Well, what I want you to do is to be chairman of the platform committee at Atlantic City, and I need to make the announcement. I hated to bother you on your vacation, but I had to get hold of you because we've got to put this thing together right away."

M: When was this? I recall the publicity about it, but I can't remember the date.

A: I can't remember the date either.

M: It was that summer though?

A: It was that summer. It was during or right after the Republican convention, probably during the Republican convention.

M: I can check that out. Before we go any further, Mr. Albert, should we try to break here?

A: I think we'd better break here.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview II]

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Signed by Carl Albert on August 23, 1979

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born in McAlester, Okla., May 10, 1908; A.B., U. of Okla., 1931; B.A., Oxford U., Eng. (Rhodes scholar), 1933, B.C.L., 1934; admitted to Oklahoma bar, 1935; legal clk. FHA, 1934-37; atty., accountant Sayre Oil Co., Oklahoma City, 1937-38; legal dept. Ohio Oil Co., Marshall, Ill., Findlay, O., 1939-40; gen. practice of law, Oklahoma City, 1938, Mattoon, Ill., 1938-39, McAlester, Okla., 1946-47; mem. of Congress, 3d Okla. Dist., 1947-1977; House majority whip, 1955-62; House majority leader, 1962-71; Speaker of the House, 1971-77. Served in U.S. Army, 1941-46, PTO. Decorated Bronze Star, Democrat.