

INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 14, 1980

INTERVIEWEE: ROLAND BIBOLET

INTERVIEWER: Michael L. Gillette

PLACE: The Royal Palace Hotel, Los Angeles, California

Tape 1 of 1

G: Why don't we start by having you sketch your arrival in Washington and when you came?

B: Okay. I got there in about 1943. I had been discharged from the navy during World War II because of some high blood pressure and some hypertension and I was sort of at loose ends. I was in Washington, and at a party I met then-Senator Ernest McFarland and someone whispered in my ear he was looking for a file clerk. So I mentioned it to him, made an appointment, and, lo and behold, I got the job. I stayed on his staff from 1944 until he was defeated by Senator [Barry] Goldwater in 1952, at which time I was his administrative assistant and he had risen to be majority leader of the United States Senate.

Let's see, I guess you want me to talk a little bit about Johnson. Before I went on his staff--I had met him when he was a congressman but just met him, you know. I remember meeting him because he was a congressman from Texas. Also because one seldom forgets a man like Lyndon Johnson. Then when he came over and became senator in what, 1948?

G: Yes.

Bibolet -- I -- 2

B: Okay. In 1950, well, of course I remember him during all the pre-tidelands debate. There was so much going on about tidelands those years that I remembered Lyndon Johnson. Then in 1950 Senator [Scott] Lucas was defeated, and Senator McFarland became majority leader and Lyndon Johnson became the whip. Well, then I was exposed quite a bit to Lyndon Johnson because, especially when Senator McFarland might be in Arizona or out of town or traveling or something, Johnson would be in charge of the floor. He used to call me up quite a bit when he wanted to know about Ernest's whereabouts and return. Sometimes the phone would ring at 3:00 a.m., so I early learned that when you were around Johnson it was a twenty-four-hour stint. He used to almost always want to know precisely the moment Ernest would be back on the Hill, and of course I couldn't find that out for him, so I sort of would try to stall him by saying, "Well, Senator, he knows now that you want him back here for a certain time and he hasn't given me a yes or a no, but he'll think about it and I'll bet you anything he'll be here at X time when you want him here." And it usually worked out that way.

G: Before we turned on the tape I was asking you about his selection as whip. Do you want to recount the story?

B: Sure, what little bit I know about it. My recollection is that it was really between Senator [Robert] Kerr of Oklahoma and Senator Johnson of Texas, and it was up to Senator McFarland, although he of course would confer with all the old heads and the others on the Policy Committee and perhaps every Democrat on the floor. But really the

Bibolet -- I -- 3

appointment was up to him. The three of them disappeared into a room one day and when they came out, well, Lyndon Johnson was the whip. Now, that's about all I know, and that's a pretty strong recollection.

G: Senator McFarland never talked about it?

B: Not to me, not to me, no.

G: Did LBJ ever talk about it?

B: No, not to me.

G: A couple of things on the pre-Goldwater campaign. Did you ever have a chance to observe Lyndon Johnson when he was running his Preparedness [Investigating] Subcommittee?

B: No, about all I knew was what was in the papers, and it was in the papers constantly. I will say that he developed, and I think deservedly so, a wonderful reputation for efficiency, for being able to hone in and bring the hearings right to fruition and, you know, get to the meat of the matter, and in a very efficient way that was really necessary and good for the country.

G: How about the [Douglas] MacArthur hearings?

B: Now, I don't have any recollections about Lyndon Johnson's activities. I remember Senator Kerr made a great speech on the magnificent MacArthur. I can't remember a single thing about Lyndon Johnson.

G: Anything on the tidelands?

B: Yes, he was in a very, very uncomfortable position, and I think he arranged it very adroitly. It could have been very embarrassing for him. He was whip for an administration that was opposing tidelands, and he couldn't even survive and be against tidelands, coming from the

Bibolet -- I -- 4

state that he came from and having the friends he had, and I think his philosophy also. He and McFarland worked out a modus operandi I think where they sort of compartmentalized things, and tidelands was assigned to McFarland so that Lyndon Johnson would be free to do what he wished. And it seemed to work very well. It could have been very embarrassing for Senator Johnson, but I don't think it ever became [so].

G: What was his relationship with McFarland like?

B: It was a very, very close one and a very friendly one. The families were friends. They conferred quite often and constantly; they were counting noses and comparing heads and getting schedules and things like that. I know more about what McFarland thought of Johnson than I do about what Johnson thought of McFarland. I have a letter at home that maybe you'll see tomorrow if you come out that Johnson wrote to me when I left his staff, and in there he said something about "It's very consoling to me to know that you're going back to Governor McFarland's staff, because there isn't a finer gentleman," something like that. "Than whom there is no finer," I think those were his words. McFarland I think had a little avuncular feeling for Johnson. He was older, he was more mature, he had more seniority in the Senate. And Johnson came to him, I know, when he was a freshman senator and so McFarland had a fatherly interest in him. When Johnson went on to the heights that he did, I know McFarland was extremely proud of the association, and when we went to Washington at the occasion of the Kennedy funeral, McFarland wanted very much to tell Lyndon personally

Bibolet -- I -- 5

that he understood what he was going through and offer his help, of course, whatever it might be, and just maybe put his arm around him and give him a little feeling of love and comfort. And he was able to do that.

Johnson's feelings for McFarland. I know he loved him a great deal and felt very close to him. After McFarland's defeat, I know he used to talk with McFarland on the phone quite a bit, getting his advice and also just--you know, when you're defeated in the Senate you're pretty dead. And I think Lyndon called very often sometimes and talked with him because he felt kindly toward him and because he wanted McFarland to get that same feeling from him, that although you have been defeated, you're still a valued person and we love you very much in the Senate.

G: Let me ask you about the 1952 campaign. You went back to work in that against the Goldwater campaign, for Senator McFarland.

B: Yes, I used to go to Arizona every year as soon as Congress was out and that year it was particularly tough. I don't think we adjourned until about October. So, yes, I was out in Arizona for the [campaign].

G: Yes. What sort of a campaign was it?

B: A heartbreaker. McFarland was very much a methodical person and Goldwater was not. The Goldwater campaign was very bombastic, and he had the trends of the times with him; he was running with Eisenhower and he was running against Truman. I think really what defeated McFarland was the absolute opposition of the two daily papers in Phoenix. It was sort of a pre-television campaign; there was only one

Bibolet -- I -- 6

station at that time, and the penetration wasn't too much. Those papers really would go after him hammer and tongs. So if there was any one thing [that caused his defeat] I think it would be what we called the [Eugene] Pulliam press.

G: Sure. The observation has been made that being majority leader was a liability in that campaign.

B: I always looked on it as an asset, that I think things might have been worse.

G: Well, I suppose the reasons cited were, number one, having to defend the party's position.

B: Right. The errand boy for the administration.

G: Right.

B: But he wasn't an errand boy for the administration. He stood up many times to Harry Truman and he was very much of an independent in his voting. But Goldwater was able to brand him, and the papers would pick it up and carry it for fact, as Harry Truman's errand boy. I thought it was very funny that about ten years later Goldwater was among the leading people saying, "What we need in this country is a Harry Truman." (Laughter)

G: The other thing, of course, [was] the fact that the job required a good deal of time.

B: Right. Okay, that was a liability. But I think the people of Arizona were rather proud of the fact that their junior senator had become majority leader of the United States Senate. You know, that kept his name out in front of the public, and I just have always felt that it

Bibolet -- I -- 7

was much more of an asset than it was a liability, that things would probably have been worse.

G: Yes. The West and Southwest seem to have been very well represented in the Senate in terms of powerful men.

B: And they worked together.

G: Did they? [Carl] Hayden and McFarland?

B: Yes. The southerners and the senators across the tier of the south-most states, with the exception maybe of [William] Knowland of California, they worked pretty well together, and with the southerners. I think Senator [Richard] Russell was perhaps one of the most powerful men in the country in those years, aided and abetted by the aging Senator [Walter] George, his colleague.

G: What was Lyndon Johnson's reaction to McFarland's defeat?

B: I think the phone was ringing five minutes after it became apparent; I think he called Senator McFarland and expressed his deep regret. And I suppose--of course, in Washington the body isn't cold before people are applying for the suite of rooms, you know. There used to be an old saying, "If you come in and find me slumped over my desk with a coronary, don't send for the doctor, ask for the room." (Laughter) I don't mean that in the sense with Senator Johnson, but I'm sure that--well, okay, it happened with Senator Lucas when he was defeated; people started thinking immediately about who would be the replacement. So, you know, things do go on.

G: Did you get any early manifestations that LBJ was interested in the job?

Bibolet -- I -- 8

B: I sort of had a gut feeling that he would be. It certainly was a natural, and it was a natural progression. During his two years as whip, he had certainly gotten his feet warm in all of the shoes that he would have to wear. I would suppose if you'd go back and read the newspapers the next day, his name would have been prominent everywhere in speculation.

G: Yes. You don't recall any conversation that he had with Senator McFarland?

B: No, I don't. I'm sure that there were some, and I'm sure that McFarland did anything to help him that he could. I have a recollection--I think it's mentioned in his statement--that he called each Democratic senator, which would certainly have been helpful. Because each one of those men was beholden in some way or another to the Majority Leader. He would have accommodated all--what were there, fifty, forty-nine, fifty at the time, whatever it was.

G: So after the campaign--do you want to catch up here?

B: We came back to Washington, and it was pretty evident to me that Senator Johnson was going to be it and it was pretty evident to everybody else. Of course we were also occupied with the sad task of closing our files and shipping things to Arizona and trying to be helpful to our staff members and things like that.

It seems to me like Sam Houston [Johnson] came to see me one day and asked me if I wanted to be on the staff. I'm not sure about that, but I have a strong recollection--I was pretty beat down, too, you know; I wasn't probably functioning as well as I should have been.

Bibolet -- I -- 9

But it seems to me like that was the first time I gave any thought to what's going to happen to Roland. So I guess I talked to Senator McFarland about it and he said, "I'll talk to Lyndon." Then I didn't hear anything for a long time. This was November, December. Let's see now, this is just my recollection, if you're interested in actually how it happened. I don't know if you are or not.

G: Sure.

B: Okay. My recollection is that it was New Year's Eve, and Joe Duke, who was sergeant at arms of the Senate, called me up--no, excuse me, it was Skeeter [Felton] Johnston. He called me up and said, "Roland, I'm emptying the icebox. Come on over." (Laughter) I think he was involved in moving from the minority [majority] to the majority [minority] office. So I went over there and he poured us a couple, and we had just sat down and Lyndon came in. He sat down and was talking to me sort of like I was going to be on his staff, and I wasn't exactly sure. And I think we went out and all had dinner together, but I can't be sure of that either. So finally I said, "Well, do you want me on your staff?" He said, "Would you like to be?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "You know, I should have seen you before Christmas. It might have made your Christmas a lot happier." (Laughter) But I suppose he was just much, much too busy.

G: Yes. Well, did he place any conditions on your employment or did he tell you what he expected?

B: No, he told me a story about how he and his help got along down on the Ranch. He said something like this, "Whenever Lady Bird hires anyone

Bibolet -- I -- 10

I always tell them, 'Well now, you get this for pay and these are your hours, and you get two weeks off every year to bury your dead.'"

(Laughter)

No, he didn't. It went the other way. He made me feel good with what I was bringing to the staff. I think all of his aides--at that time there was Gerry Siegel, Booth Mooney, George Reedy, Walter Jenkins, Arthur Perry, Jack Hight and myself; I don't think I'm leaving anybody out--we were all at the same pay scale, which perhaps wasn't fair for a person like Walter who was so much more under the gun than the rest of us. But that got rid of a lot of problems.

G: How were the chores divided?

B: Well, if you were to draw a map, here would be Lyndon and then here would be Walter, of course, with Mary somewhere over here. Now, Mary left the staff shortly after that, Mary--

G: Rather.

B: Right. Then over in one box was Jack Hight and the Texas office. Then under political would have been George Reedy. Then Gerry Siegel and I were sort of equal on legislation. Who am I leaving out? Booth Mooney sort of was special on speech writing, but there was a strong umbilical cord with George Reedy on that. George Reedy used to put in the legislative and national stuff and Booth Mooney would put in the Piney Woods and the Alamo and that sort of stuff. That may be an oversimplification, and it changed quite a bit.

G: Did most of the legislation work come out of the Policy Committee staff?

Bibolet -- I -- 11

B: Yes, yes.

G: And the Texas office, that would be Jack Hight and Walter Jenkins presumably?

B: And me later on.

G: And you later on.

B: And Sam Houston in his own special niche over there. And Dorothy Nichols, who perhaps was his personal steno. She also did work for Walter and did a lot of the signing. Then within a year I was in that phase of it, you see.

G: I see. Well, where would Lyndon Johnson spend most of his day, which one of these offices?

B: Each day was different, but almost always he would come first to the Senate Office Building office. Are you familiar with the Senate Office Building?

G: Yes.

B: Well, at that time it was right next to the cafeteria on the second floor. There were three rooms there I think--four rooms, I guess it was. He would park his car downstairs and walk up and come into his own office, and Walter would immediately know that he was there and would go in. Walter would carry a legal pad with about twenty-two pages scribbled on. He wouldn't usually get to give a single one of those to Lyndon, and Lyndon would fill up twenty-two more pages.

(Laughter) I don't see how Walter functioned sometimes.

The mail would be all stacked up and ready for him, and he'd take it in and sometimes he would look at it and sometimes he wouldn't.

Bibolet -- I -- 12

And of course there would be a list of a long number of phone calls, usually from other senators about pending matters on the floor. Now, my recollection is then he would go over on the Hill, say, ten-ish, eleven-ish, noon-ish. This was pre-heart attack. I understand that after his heart attack, the doctor used to tell him, you know, "Don't run over there. Take five minutes or ten minutes," or whatever it was, and with his literal mind he used to get out his watch, "Okay, ten minutes. One, two, three--" (Laughter)

G: Is that right?

B: Yes. He was a bug for doing things efficiently and correctly. He told me one time how to tie my necktie and save two minutes every morning.

(Laughter)

G: Is that right?

B: Then he would be over in the Senate side of the Capitol for almost all of the rest of the day: lunch; committee meetings; his duties as majority [minority] leader. He had a private, private office, and he had a private office in the Democratic Policy Committee, and of course he had the Democratic Caucus office, too. He used the hideaway office, and he was using it more and more and more and more as time went on.

G: Well, now, the big office was what, P-38, the big majority leader's office?

B: You see, it's so changed now that what I might tell you and what might register in your mind might be different.

G: But the big elegant office in the Capitol, with the chandelier--?

Bibolet -- I -- 13

B: Was that up on the third floor?

G: I think so.

B: In the front? As you look out of the Senate wing on the right-hand side in the front on the top. Does that ring a bell?

G: I'm not sure.

B: Well, there were two offices and a bathroom, and it was right around from the elevator. It was directly above the Sergeant at Arms Office, if they haven't moved that. Does that ring a bell?

G: No, that was--which office, the--?

B: Well, we called it the hideaway; I don't remember the number. It was off the Senate gallery. Now, that might have changed a million times since I was there. It was with a fireplace and two beautiful chandeliers with some crystals about that big hanging there. Well, it might have been the same office, I don't know. But the whole Capitol is so changed now because of putting forward the front on it.

G: Sure. Well, I don't want to get ahead of your material there.

B: Well, let's see if I've left anything out. Warren Woodward, I jotted his name down here, too. He was on the staff but left just shortly before I came on. And I used to work with him, too, he and Walter.

Okay, I went to work for him on January 1, 1953, and I think I was on for exactly two years, to January 1, 1955. I think I've mentioned to you that during the first part of that time my desk was literally in the Majority [Minority] Policy Committee up on the third floor in the back. I stayed there that summer. Something typically Johnson happened then to me, too. He knew that I had gone directly

Bibolet -- I -- 14

from the heartbreak of the Goldwater campaign to working for him and I hadn't had any time off for a long, long time. So a friend of mine was working in the consulate in Genoa, and he wrote me--he had just gotten married--and he said, "Why don't you come over and visit my wife and me this summer?" So I wrote back and said I was pretty low man on the totem pole and I wasn't going to go. Well, evidently while I was dictating that letter, Walter Jenkins had walked through the room, and the next thing I knew, Walter Jenkins called and said, "Roland, the Senator heard you had an invitation to Europe and he thought it would be a great idea if you took it." So I thought that was very nice of them to arrange that. I did need a vacation very badly.

When I came back, Congress had adjourned and they were all down in Austin, and my orders were to proceed down to Austin. So I did that fall, and I was in Austin most of September, October, November and December. Being in a state office, the legislative part is pretty much put aside; it's the willy-nilly and the nitty-gritty of Mrs. Smith coming in about getting her boy out of the service and this sort of thing. Our offices were in what, the Federal Building?

G: Yes.

B: I guess they still are. And Jack Hight was there and Walter was there.

I remember on Christmas we were all invited out to the Ranch, which would have been my first visit out there, and I can tell you a perfectly awful faux pas that I committed if you're interested.

Bibolet -- I -- 15

G: Sure.

B: It's a little out of our topic but. . . . I was kind of nervous; it was my first time out there. We had all gone together with some kind of a present for the Johnsons. We went out in maybe three or four cars, all of us, after work one day, to have a sort of a Christmas party before we all split and went to our homes and things. So we got out there. My recollection is that Senator Johnson had given Mrs. Johnson wall-to-wall carpeting on the whole first floor for Christmas, and it was just brand-new. And we all went in and sat down and someone came around and took our orders for drinks and I asked for a tequila, and they handed me a tequila and I spilled it on the new rug. I felt pretty bad about that, and they brought me another one and I spilled the second one. So I must have been pretty nervous. Lady Bird just sort of raised her eyebrows like that. (Laughter) That's all I can remember about the Christmas party. I'm sure we had a wonderful dinner and all got back feeling very good.

As I said over the phone to you, we did have a very strong feeling of community and support for one another and a lot of love for one another, too. I still feel very warmly about those people.

G: Lyndon Johnson has had a reputation for treating his staff like his family.

B: And how's that? (Laughter) Is that good or bad?

G: One thing, for example, that staff members have said over and over again is that he treated his staff as his social friends.

Bibolet -- I -- 16

B: Yes, that's right, he did. He saw to it that we all got a nice Christmas present. I think we got a tie that Christmas and I still have mine. Every time I met him in the hall, he would stop and talk; usually it was telling me something to do.

I remember years later when he landed one time in Tucson, Arizona--this is when he was president--I wasn't there, but my mother and dad had gone from where they lived on a ranch about sixty miles to the airport to be in on it. Lyndon somehow or other found out about it, and he had them called out and brought over and had a picture taken with my mother which we still have, which is sort of special, you know. I don't know of many men that would have thought to do that and had they thought to do it, would have taken the time to do it. And God knows, he had a busy schedule. So he did treat us very, very well. He also treated us very badly sometimes.

G: Yes, the other side of the coin was that--

B: Right.

G: --he made incredible demands on the staff.

B: He was either at your feet or at your throat.

(Laughter)

And I say that with a lot of loving memories of him. Yes, he would have no hesitation to dial anybody's number at any time of the day or night and just start right in, you know. It sort of worked--well, I'm glad I'm not the ulcer type.

G: Was he usually pleased with the performance of the staff or was he often critical?

Bibolet -- I -- 17

B: Yes, I think he was [pleased], but you had to realize that yourself because he wouldn't tell you. You would find out about it some other way. I think his emotions re his staff were almost like a pendulum, and it depends on where you were caught at the moment. Because if he ate you out about something, he would always make up for it somehow. Or conversely, if he complimented you about something, well, then the ceiling fell in on you within twenty-four hours.

(Laughter)

G: Well, were his criticisms generally well founded, or did he normally just look for things to explode over?

B: He was a man of absolutely tremendous interior tensions, and in a way, his explosions at his staff were compliments. He would eat me out and I would feel that he feels secure enough with me to be able to do this and therefore there's a great deal of trust there. Does that answer your question?

G: Yes.

B: Okay.

G: This enabled the staff to take this sort of thing?

B: Yes, most of them. Some of them couldn't. Every now and then he would get a very bitter resignation letter.

G: Really?

B: Yes, but the vast majority of them, yes, they thought very highly of him; they loved him, and we loved him. It was a very, very stimulating atmosphere.

Bibolet -- I -- 18

He was constantly pointing to the fine staff work done by other senators' staffs.

G: Yes. And yet his was regarded as one of the hardest working.

B: That's right, that's right. And I was told once that before I came on his staff he used to say that his people on his staff should be like the Majority Leader's staff. But I used to take a lot of that just as part of his personality and try to keep my slate clean, just keep doing what I felt he wanted me to do.

G: He liked to have a lot of mail go out to all kinds of people that. . . .

B: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. In 1954 I think we wrote a letter to every graduate in every Texas high school that there is, and that's a lot of Texans.

(Laughter)

I think every member of the staff was involved in some of that activity.

G: In that time that you spent in Austin in 1953, that was during the period that he was trying to blunt opposition the following year in his re-election, and he was traveling a great deal.

B: Yes. A great deal.

G: Did you travel with him?

B: No, I never traveled with him one single time.

G: Did you see him dealing with his constituents there in Austin? Did you get a feel for--?

B: He wasn't in the office too much, but I did see that he was able to do it very adroitly. The usual pattern is for the visiting firemen to

Bibolet -- I -- 19

come in, meet with the Senator for a couple of minutes, and then be turned on to the staff person that handles that area, which might have been Jack Hight or Walter or Sam Houston or myself or anybody else. And he was always very good at that; he was very, very fast with names and places and recollections.

G: Yes.

(Interruption)

B: I'm going to reminisce too much.

G: No.

B: Okay. We were talking about this tape recorder that's taping this conversation, hopefully, and I was reminded of my very first experience with Senator Johnson when I first went on his staff. In the Majority Policy Committee when McFarland was majority leader, we had pioneered the use of tape recording. He used to tape a weekly radio broadcast for Arizona, which we would send to all the stations in Arizona. So Senator Johnson thought that was a fine idea, and we prepared and made all the preparations for a taping for Texas. Since I had been the only one exposed to it, I had the misfortune to be the one to arrange for the tape recording. So we went in the private office in the Majority Policy Committee room, and I got out the tape recorder and turned it on and put the microphone around him and everything. He read for about five minutes and I took the tape and sent it over to I guess it was the radio gallery where they would make copies and copies and copies and copies. And it came back that it wasn't of broadcast quality. So Senator Johnson had gone about his schedule and he just

Bibolet -- I -- 20

didn't have time to do it again. Well, I didn't know anything about this until early the next morning when my phone rang, and out of a sound sleep I hear this, "Roland, that's a hell of a way to run a railroad." (Laughter) I'm a very unmechanical person; I was the worst one possible to have been chosen. But it turned out that one of the tubes in it had burned out and so forth.

G: He seems to have had a fascination with gadgets.

B: Yes, he certainly did.

G: Do you have any other examples of this?

B: Well, let's see, he liked to give away--

G: Little radios?

B: Radios that played and made noises. And he always used to forget his radio, and on the Senate floor there would be a little ting-a-ling whenever his alarm went off. Let's see, he had an intercom system rigged in his office that was absolutely superfluous. He had two telephones, and [with] one he could call anybody in[to] the room. Well, the other one had a built-in intercom and I don't know why he ever had the other one. But he was just absolutely wild about gadgets and things, you know, hidden pencil sharpeners, things that opened up and became bars and things like that.

(Laughter)

G: Well, I don't want to get away from your notes, but shall we start with 1953?

B: Let me see. I think the only things that I haven't covered that are on my notes here are the times I saw him after I left his staff. I

Bibolet -- I -- 21

think I maybe told you verbally. I saw Sam Houston briefly when he and Mary Hose [Fish Haselton] were on their honeymoon in Phoenix, and the only other time that I had any other contact with Senator Johnson--times--was out of a clear blue sky he arranged for me to have a two-week jaunt to Germany as a guest of the German government in 1964, in July and August of 1964, I think, for which I was most grateful. And the day after Kennedy's funeral--that's my recollection--Governor McFarland and I had gone to Washington, and we went over to the White House and I briefly saw Walter Jenkins and--who else? I saw Mildred Stegall and [inaudible].

G: It was George Reedy, wasn't it?

B: No, I didn't see George Reedy. I saw the guy whose name I mentioned that was in charge of the files, Bruce--

G: Bruce Thomas, yes.

B: Bruce Thomas. Just very briefly. They were awfully busy people and I just perhaps shook Lyndon Johnson's hand. He and McFarland were closeted. My recollection is Senator Ed Johnson of Colorado was with us. And that was the last contact that I had with him. So I guess that would about cover my recollections, unless you can stimulate me.
(Interruption)

G: I was asking you about--

B: My recollection is the circumstances, they were cutting some tapes in behalf of somebody running for election, I can't remember who. Senator Russell was talking of the Majority Leader, and he said, "I've

Bibolet -- I -- 22

never known anyone whose brain was more closely connected to his tongue than Lyndon Johnson."

G: During 1953 Senator [Robert] Taft, the Republican majority leader, was dying and [William] Knowland was coming in. Did you notice any difference between the way Johnson dealt with Taft and the way he dealt with Knowland?

B: Let's see, Senator [Kenneth] Wherry, was he still there? He was, wasn't he? You see, as I said previously, where Lyndon Johnson was one, there were three Republicans. So he had to deal with the Minority [Majority] Leader, the leader of the Republican Caucus, and the leader of the Republican Policy Committee, which were three different people. So that took three sessions instead of one if they wanted to deal with the Democrat. I can't remember anything specific. I have some gut feelings about it. I feel that Senator Taft was a much easier person to deal with than Senator Knowland was. Did you ever know Knowland?

G: No.

B: He was, I always felt, a rather pompous, self-important person. He was built sort of like a fat football player. He used to come stomping down the aisle very purposeful, and he spoke very purposefully. He wanted very, very badly to be president and I think made a terrible miscalculation thinking he could be governor and become president instead of stay a senator and become president. And Taft was a person, as I observed, one could sit down and talk with and shake hands and come up with a good feeling and a feeling of trust. Now, I don't

Bibolet -- I -- 23

think that answers your question, but it's about all the light I can shed on it.

G: Sure. Well, of course, this was a time when the parties were split so evenly in the Senate.

B: Right. He was really minority leader the first two years; I keep calling him majority leader, but he was really minority leader.

G: He used the term Democratic leader, didn't he, as opposed to minority--?

B: He didn't like minority because it was sort of a put-down word in his mind. He also didn't like the word whip, I don't think.

G: Really?

B: No, he liked assistant, assistant to the majority leader or assistant majority leader.

G: He seems to have been able to outmaneuver Knowland on some of these close votes.

B: I have another gut feeling that he used to chuckle a lot privately. Yes. Knowland was such a pompous person and, I don't know, it was sort of like dealing with a statue or an institution, you know, sort of like having a meeting with the Constitution.

G: Well, one of the ways that he seemed to do it was to siphon off a few stray Republican votes. How did he do that?

B: By wheeling and dealing. Of course, they were busy siphoning off a few Democratic votes, but with the strength of the leadership that Lyndon gave to the Democrats that became increasingly hard to do, especially as he got in the driver's seat. Especially the years after

Bibolet -- I -- 24

I left, he became an extremely powerful leader, because on a very personal basis every man on his team was beholden to him for one thing or another. He was an extremely adroit politician.

G: Yes.

B: I heard George Reedy say one time, "Roland, I like two things: I like politics and fishing. Senator Johnson likes one thing: politics." And he did; he lived and breathed politics constantly, and that's what made him such a great leader.

G: Yes. Well, let's look at a couple of these Republican senators, Bill Langer, for example. He was constantly getting Langer to vote with him.

B: Yes.

G: How did he do that, do you know?

B: Well, Langer's heart was across the aisle a lot. He had to be a Republican from his state or he couldn't have ever been elected, but I think his heart was across the aisle. He was very strong in North Dakota because he had done a lot of things for North Dakota, so he could vote pretty independently of his position. I suppose when a project came along, well, Lyndon would be very helpful to Langer, and then Langer would feel very close to supporting them. And the Republicans hated him for it. He used to make very long speeches; we used to call him Linger Longer Langer.

(Laughter)

G: Molly [George] Malone was another one.

Bibolet -- I -- 25

B: An absolute maverick. I can't shed any light on what part Lyndon played in his votes. He was very unpopular with his fellow Republicans, for that reason. You see, where Lyndon could be so very strong was that he could unify the Democrats, because he was so strong with the southerners and he was so strong with the northerners.

G: Well, but wasn't there a considerable element of Senate liberals that was suspicious of him?

B: That diminished as time went on. They were led by Hubert Humphrey, and I think Hubert was one of Lyndon's great supporters in the latter years of his majority leadership. And even someone like Senator [Harry Flood] Byrd was voting increasingly with the Democrats. He used to be on the other side as often as Langer was, you know.

G: Yes. Well, let me ask you about the Policy Committee. How was the Policy Committee run?

B: Well, physically they had a weekly luncheon meeting, and the luncheon would be served up there in that little room, if it's still up there, with one of the old guys from down in the Senate restaurant waiting on them. They would have an agenda that the staff would labor over, and I think the agenda pretty much went out the window when they would just get in there and talk a lot. My impression was that things weren't really done in those meetings. Either they were all cut and dried before the meeting or the meetings were just sort of gab sessions, just rap sessions.

G: Well now, wasn't the purpose, though, to pass on legislation, to determine the--?

Bibolet -- I -- 26

- B: Yes, the scheduling of it. It functioned sort of like the Rules Committee does in the House, and then the majority leader would announce so-and-so. But I am sure that Senator Johnson never went into a single one of those meetings that he hadn't talked to every member and gotten pretty much a consensus.
- G: Really?
- B: In fact, I don't think he ever went into anything in his whole life that he didn't pretty much know what the outcome would be, certainly politically.
- G: Was that simply because he preferred to do it one-on-one or--?
- B: It's a lot safer that way, for one thing. And, you know, it's bound to have an impression on you if the majority leader calls you up, no matter what senator you are.
- G: Yes. Would you say that he by and large ran the Policy Committee, or controlled it?
- B: Yes, very much so. The Democratic leader, whether he is majority or minority pretty much has to do that, and I know Lyndon did it, and I think he did very properly, too. My recollection is he appointed Senator [Herbert] Lehman on the Policy Committee, and I always felt that was a very big and courageous step. Is that right? Was he on there, Lehman of New York?
- G: Well, I know he put Murray on, Jim Murray.
- B: Yes, Murray of Montana.
- G: I don't recall Lehman being on there, but he could have been. I'll check.

Bibolet -- I -- 27

B: Well, maybe my recollection is wrong.

G: It was heavy with southerners and westerners.

B: Right. Of course Murray was a westerner, but he was a liberal, and a lot of the southerners distrusted anything that said liberal at all. That was almost communistic. You see, so much of this happened in the shadow of the [Joseph] McCarthy years.

G: Yes. Did Johnson seem very interested in foreign policy during this period?

B: Again, just sort of a gut recollection that I have, I think he became increasingly interested. His work on the Preparedness Subcommittee several years before had sort of been his baptism of fire for the world stage. I think he became increasingly aware of it, and I'm certain that a lot of it served as a crucible for his training for later, for a later need he had for it.

G: Was he consulted by the Eisenhower Administration?

B: Yes. They had to consult him. In fact, he got a lot of their legislation through for them whereas their own leadership couldn't do it. I always felt that Eisenhower should have given him more credit for it, but he didn't.

G: Yes. Did LBJ feel the same way?

B: I imagine he did. You know, I can't remember the occasion, but I remember at one of our staff meetings he was late and Walter was presiding, and then he came in and whatever we were talking about, he announced that John Foster Dulles had returned with something, I forget what, and he said, "Now if [Dean] Acheson had come back with

Bibolet -- I -- 28

this, they'd have skinned him alive." They had been giving John Foster great accolades for whatever it was, maybe SEATO or God knows what it was that he brought back. I think we are still paying in Iran for some of John Foster Dulles' work, and his brother.

G: Did you ever get any insights as to his being consulted on the Indochina situation in 1954?

B: Yes. Well, first off, my recollection is Eisenhower invited him to go to Korea, and then something came up and he didn't go. But he was making embryonic plans to go to Korea, and he did go to Indochina, didn't he? Not while I was there, it was later on.

G: No, [it was] later, yes.

B: As majority leader, I mean, didn't he go to Indochina?

G: I don't think he went until the sixties but--

B: No, maybe [not] till he was vice president. Well, perhaps not. But I know they realized down at the other end of the Avenue that they had to stay in good graces with Lyndon Johnson or they couldn't get some of their stuff through Congress. And perhaps you have his schedules in front of you; I know he was very often going down to the White House to meetings and things like that.

G: Well, the occasion that has been noted was giving aid to the French. Eisenhower wanted to do it, and the Democrats, Johnson and Russell in particular, reportedly set conditions for their approval.

B: He made a floor speech on that and I can't remember exactly the content, but I think what they did was to try and keep Eisenhower to the straight and narrow on a few things. I remember he was going over

Bibolet -- I -- 29

his speech and he could not pronounce Dien Bien Phu. I can't either very well. And it was at the time when Dien Bien Phu was very much in the news. So we used to have sort of a joke that as he would give a speech he would read this page and then the hand from the wing would bring the next page, because someone would be typing the last version. It would probably be Willie Day Taylor's hand. But anyway, he finally got to this place and we were all breathless to see what he would do with Dien Bien Phu, and he said, "And people are dying in far off places with unpronounceable names." (Laughter)

G: Is that right?

B: I can't remember if that was in Texas or if that was on the floor, but he did make a position speech, or my recollection is he made a position speech on Indochina when the French were going down.

G: Anything on the Bricker Amendment?

B: No, I can't help you on that.

G: He persuaded Senator George to offer a substitute.

B: Yes, he did a lot of work on it. George Reedy might be able to help you on that one.

G: There was an Omnibus Housing Act in 1954 that showed some of his expertise.

B: I don't have any recollection of it.

G: Atomic Energy Act of 1954?

B: No.

G: There was an overriding issue of public versus private power in the wake of the Dixon-Yates controversy.

Bibolet -- I -- 30

- B: No, I don't have any recollection on that. Again George Reedy or Gerry Siegel or Walter [might help you].
- G: What was LBJ's attitude toward Joseph McCarthy?
- B: Oh, I think personally he thought he was a rat and very disruptive to the Senate. The big problem was how to defang him, which they finally came up with. I know at the time, when they passed the censure resolution, I thought that that's not going to work. That guy is just going to go on. He's got such a thick hide, he will just go on. But I was totally wrong. He might as well have died the next day after that censure.
- G: Johnson's strategy seems to have been to keep the Democrats as united as possible.
- B: Oh, yes, and he was a master at that. I think he came closer to that than anybody else, and than anyone else even could have. Yes, those were pretty tough times for everybody.
- G: And his problem I guess was made especially difficult because McCarthy had a lot of support in Texas.
- B: Yes.
- G: Anything on that in particular?
- B: Not that I know personally. I know it was a tremendous problem for him and I know he was hearing from these friends, you know, and they were people that spoke with a very loud, firm voice.
- G: Spent a lot of money.
- B: Right. That's a loud, firm voice. (Laughter) But I can't feel that

Bibolet -- I -- 31

it hurt Johnson in any way. Certainly in his next senatorial election down there he won big. I can't even remember who ran against him.

G: Dudley Dougherty.

B: No, that was in the primary, but in the general [election]?

G: Carlos Wilson, wasn't it, or something like that? [Carlos Watson]

B: No, I don't remember that. I remember Dudley Dougherty.

G: Well, LBJ was criticized for not speaking out against McCarthy loudly enough and not making it enough of an issue.

B: But I think, instead of making a loud speech, he went around and got things done about it. That, in my way, is true leadership. I know Senator Kerr made a big speech about it, and Margaret Chase Smith made a big speech about it, and I guess Ernest made one at one time. It was something that had been boiling up; it was a pain in the tummy for many years, you know.

G: Well, what were Johnson's techniques for getting legislation passed?

B: Well, the first one was to do all his homework. He always knew all the facts and everything. He was never uninformed about any legislation, who introduced it, who was behind it, what its history was in the House, who was for it, who was agin' it, all this sort of thing. He was never caught with his pants down, as far as doing his homework. Second, and there's no need for me to repeat to you, I'm sure everyone you've interviewed has said he was a good nose-counter. He had his pulse on the Senate. You could name a topic and he could tell you how the vote would go, just like that, any time. Then I guess the final thing was he constantly kept his lines of communication open, especially

Bibolet -- I -- 32

with his Democrats. He was always available to them, and he always would go to them. So he knew what it was. This is all doing his homework. So that was where his power lay. If something was going to not be defeated, well, then it wouldn't come up for a while until it was ready.

G: Yes. Well, let's talk about counting. How was he able to count votes as closely as he did?

B: Just by knowing the Senate. I can't tell you. He just knew the Senate. You name the item and he would know that Walter George would be opposed to that, who would go with Walter George, that Humphrey would be for it, who would go with Humphrey, who would be in the middle and who would dodge it, who would be absent, and who was on a trip to South Africa and so forth. I have a feeling I'm not answering your question. I don't know how he did it.

G: Was Bobby Baker useful in that capacity?

B: Yes, I think he was. Certainly during my years there, Bobby Baker was a good fact-getter. He was a gofer and an errand boy, and a very good one, especially with the southerners and the more conservative senators. Bobby was from South Carolina, I think, and I think Senator [Burnet] Maybank was his sponsor at the beginning. And Skeeter Johnston also could be very helpful. But Lyndon did almost all of it on his own; he was a real one-to-one man, you know, a real button-holer. You've met him. The Johnson treatment, I'm sure you've heard of that.

G: Yes. Well, that was next. How was he able to persuade senators who were reluctant to vote for a piece of legislation to do so?

Bibolet -- I -- 33

B: I don't know if I can answer the how in either one of these questions.

It was locked up in the man's personality. He was a keen judge of human nature, especially his forty-eight humans, or however many there were. I guess he had more later on. He just knew them pretty well. He probably didn't even have to talk to them to know how they were going to vote. Also he was in a position constantly to do them little favors, scheduling bills, arranging for absences, even to such a simple thing as going out and greeting the visitors from Minnesota, you know, that Senator Humphrey had in his office or something like that.

G: Wouldn't there be a lot of quid pro quos, though, say--?

B: Oh, I'm sure there were. I'm sure there was lots of trading. But I would say that Senator Johnson would be the most powerful of the horse traders, and so he would usually get the better of the deal in what he wanted. And yet he had that magic quality of making almost everybody very happy with him. I was there when he was just getting his feet wet, but I don't recall later on, when he was nominated for vice president and everything, any single voice of criticism against him within the Senate.

G: Of course, there was criticism in the latter part of the fifties, that it was a one-man rule and--

B: Well, yes, [J. William] Fulbright and some of those people. That's right, there was.

G: Do you think that he placed sufficient emphasis on the merits of a

Bibolet -- I -- 34

piece of legislation, or was it simply a question of whether or not the majority [would] favor it?

- B: No, no, I feel that he felt very strongly that government was an instrument to serve the people, and I'm sure that he looked at all legislation with that in mind. I don't think he ever--well, I don't think he would very often be swayed by any other than what was good for the country, what he felt was good for the country.
- G: Was there a system for evaluating legislation on the merits, or did he just go through the normal committee hearings?
- B: Well, the Policy Committee used to get bill studies up for him, content and all this sort of thing, and there's a great deal of that that comes from the originating committee, too, you know. I had a feeling that Johnson would study that very carefully because he was so informed on everything, so informed so early that very often our memos to him were quite superfluous. He would say, "You left out Title II," or something like that, you know.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

Date _____