

INTERVIEWEE : EMANUEL CELLER

INTERVIEWER : T. H. BAKER

March 19, 1969

B: This is the interview with Emanuel Celler. Sir, when Mr. Johnson first came to the House of Representatives, you had been a member for something like fourteen years, I believe. Do you recall your first meeting with Mr. Johnson in those days?

C: Yes. I remember Mr. Johnson as a tall, gangling Texan. He was very personable, very friendly, and our relations were most cordial.

B: Did he seek out the older hands in the House, like yourself, for advice on how to be a Congressman?

C: No, I didn't find that he did that. He was very affable and very sociable, and we often sat down next to each other in the House and discussed current problems.

B: These would be mostly legislative matters as opposed to personal items?

C: Yes, legislative matters.

B: Was it obvious to the House generally that there was a kind of special relationship between Mr. Rayburn and Mr. Johnson?

C: When he first came into the House, we noticed that after awhile there was quite a liaison between him and the President--President Roosevelt. We also noticed--in answer to your first question--that there was a close relationship between Mr. Johnson and Sam Rayburn. There is always a wonderful esprit de corps between the Texans who are members of the House. Just as there is also an esprit de corps and a close relationship between

the members from the State of New York, whence I come.

B: The relationship between Mr. Johnson and Mr. Roosevelt--you said it was noticeable. Was this because of Mr. Johnson visiting the White House, or exactly how is that kind of thing--?

C: The information usually seeped out of his relationships with the then--President.

B: Was it unusual for a new Congressman like that to have such a close relationship?

C: Yes, it was.

B: Was the knowledge of this relationship advantageous to Mr. Johnson in his work in the House?

C: It gave, of course, Mr. Johnson leverage which the other members didn't have. I think by-and-large it must have been an advantage to him. It gave him a bit of prestige, also, which was lacking in some of the other members--not that he needed that prestige because he was always a dominant personality.

B: Even as a young man in those days?

C: Yes.

B: In the years in which he was still in the House before he moved to the Senate, could you classify Mr. Johnson as a liberal or conservative or Southerner or Westerner?

C: I would say he was in-between. He was a liberal conservative with more shadings toward liberalism than shadings the other way.

B: Then, after he became leader of the Senate--was elected to the Senate and eventually moved into the position of leadership--did he work closely with people like you, high up in the House leadership?

C: Being chairman of the Judiciary Committee in the latter years of his leadership in the Senate, I was thrown in considerable contact with him because I had floor managed numbers of bills which he had to handle in the Senate. And our relationship grew wider and deeper because thereof.

B: One of the major bills that you handled together with Mr. Johnson was the Civil Rights Act of '57, was it not?

C: Yes, the original '57 act. That was the first breakthrough on civil rights.

B: You were the author of the House bill, is that not correct?

C: That's it--in fact, my name is on all the civil rights bills.

B: I knew it was. The bill of '57 was changed considerably in the Senate, presumably because of Mr. Johnson's doing. Is that a fair view of the issue?

C: I think it is.

B: Did his actions in that case dismay yourself and the liberals?

C: No. I realized that you have to "bend sometimes rather than break." You have to compromise, and Lyndon had to do just that in order to get the bill through in the Senate. This was a revolutionary bill--this first breakthrough against the barrier of civil rights. It was a highly important bill, and it was worth the compromise.

B: When the bill was first drawn up--the House version--did you know or assume then that probably parts of it would have to be changed or eliminated?

C: I had no such thoughts in mind. I wanted to get as strong a bill as I possibly could. I never waivered from that ideal. I always have in the back of my mind generally that you have to trim your sails sometimes to make headway.

B: While the bill was going through the Senate--the '57 bill--did Mr. Johnson keep you informed of his plans?

C: It wasn't day-by-day information. I would journey to the Senate on occasion and ask him what progress was made. He very properly told me, and frankly told me some of his difficulties, but that progress was being made.

B: Did you discuss the specific changes that were going on, such as the debate over the jury trial proceedings and the--?

C: No, I didn't specifically discuss any. We spoke in general language then.

B: Do you believe that as it eventually came out of the Senate, that was the only bill that could have been passed?

C: I think that's a good statement. At that time.

B: Yes, of course, at that time. Was there much distress among the liberals at what had happened to the bill?

C: No, I think the liberals were pretty jubilant that we had this break through.

B: Was there much questioning of Mr. Johnson's motives. That is, was there any thought among the liberals that perhaps Mr. Johnson was not sincerely interested in civil rights but was simply trying to make a record possibly for Presidential ambitions?

C: I don't think that thought entered into the minds of the members. I never heard that said at that time.

B: Then, there was another--this Civil Rights Bill of '60 which you also were the author of--which was passed shortly after that. Did that involve any particular consultations with Mr. Johnson as Majority Leader?

C: They involved consultations at the White House with President Kennedy--

- B: That would have been the last year of Eisenhower's Administration.
- C: Excuse me--involved consultations at the White House with President Eisenhower. But in the beginning, if I remember correctly, there were no consultations with President Johnson.
- B: Were you involved in the formation of the Democratic Advisory Council after 1958?
- C: No, I was not.
- B: The agency that Paul Butler established in connection with the National Committee.
- C: I was not a member.
- B: Were you asked to be a member of it?
- C: I was not.
- B: I was asking because Mr. Johnson and Mr. Rayburn apparently either resented or did not intend to participate in that kind of activity.
- C: I was not a member.
- B: You were at the 1960 Democratic convention, were you not, sir?
- C: Yes.
- B: On the Platforms and Resolutions Committee, I believe.
- C: Yes.
- B: Were you surprised at the offer of the Vice Presidency to Mr. Johnson?
- C: Not necessarily. I felt that Lyndon had earned the right either to run for President in his own right, or to take second place. I wasn't surprised that it was offered to him.
- B: Were you surprised that it was accepted?
- C: I was a little surprised that he had accepted it, yes.
- B: Presumably, Mr. Rayburn's influence counted for a good deal in that.

C: That's right.

B: Did you play any part in talking to either Mr. Kennedy or Mr. Rayburn during those activities?

C: No, I did not.

B: Was the adding of Mr. Johnson to the ticket acceptable among the political groups you were associated with--the liberal groups in New York?

C: Yes, it was.

B: There were some liberals, there at the convention, who seemed not to particularly care for the idea.

C: They didn't care for the idea of somebody from the South, that's all. Then some of Mr. Johnson's votes were not necessarily of the liberal trend, and they used that against him.

B: Did you, incidentally by that time, have any doubts as to where Mr. Johnson stood in regard to progressive legislation?

C: Not at that time. I think he was on his way towards the goal of progressive legislation.

B: Did Mr. Johnson, as the Vice Presidential candidate, do any campaigning in your area in 1960?

C: Yes, he did.

B: How effective was he?

C: I don't think he was too effective in New York when he was running for Vice President. Of course, he was overshadowed by President Kennedy.

B: Did Mrs. Johnson do any campaigning in New York?

C: No, not that I remember.

B: Then, in the years of Mr. Kennedy's presidency--in the first year of the Presidency the leadership of the House changed when Mr. Rayburn died and

Mr. McCormack became Speaker. Did that make a great deal of difference to the operations of the House?

C: I would say that the leadership of Mr. McCormack was not as dynamic as the leadership of Mr. Rayburn.

B: Is there a difference in effectiveness, or is it just a difference in methods?

C: I think there's a difference in effectiveness as well as method.

B: Was Mr. Johnson, as Vice President, active in working with the legislature--with either house of Congress?

C: Oh yes.

B: Did you, for example, have direct contact with him in, say, the civil rights proposal of '63?

C: No. That's when he was Vice President. No. My contacts with the higher ups were directly with President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy and their entourage.

B: Another civil rights legislation was proposed in '63--the Celler-Clark bill. There was some indication at the time that perhaps the Administration--Mr. Kennedy himself--was not pushing hard enough on it. Was that your view at the time?

C: No.

B: You feel that the bill was given adequate support there in '63 from the Administration.

C: As far as I know.

B: Do you think that the Kennedy program would have passed eventually--the Kennedy legislative program?

C: Which--?

B: If President Kennedy had lived, would, say, the '63 Civil Rights Bill

eventually have been made into law anyway?

C: Oh, I think it would have been. Of course, I'm quite sure that Johnson would have stepped in to carry on where he left off.

B: Were you among those contacted by Mr. Johnson immediately after the assassination?

C: Yes.

B: What did he say to you then?

C: He hoped that the same allegiance I had given to the Presidency while Kennedy was in power would continue, and I pledged allegiance to him. I indicated that I had the highest regard for him, and I would stand by him through thick and through thin--and I did.

B: Did he mention at that time any specific legislative proposals?

C: Not at that particular time, but periodically he had a number of us at the White House discussing various legislative proposals. Those meetings were very frequent.

B: One of the first and most important pieces of legislation in '64 was the passage of the Civil Rights Bill--the Public Accommodations Act.

C: Yes, that was a very important act.

B: I understand that there were meetings in which you participated that evolved the strategy for passing that bill. Could you describe what went on at that kind of meeting?

C: I had indicated the difficulties that I had, and the roadblocks, and I asked if he could conveniently help me remove some of those roadblocks, in my committee. He said he would try. We had men like Larry O'Brien and Barefoot Sanders and others in the White House working in that direction--working most effectively. Johnson had a way of buckling to himself very

loyal friends, very loyal lieutenants. Those men like Larry O'Brien and Barefoot Sanders did a masterful job in that regard. And they immeasurably helped me.

B: When the bill was eventually cleared intact by your committee and passed intact on the House floor, did Mr. Johnson make it clear that this time he did not intend to ask for any kind of compromise in the Senate on the bill?

C: I don't remember any such declaration. You see, by that time, we had developed a pretty good climate background for civil rights legislation. We had passed a number of bills previously of the civil rights nature. The time was ripe now for civil rights. I think it was Victor Hugo who once said, "When the time for an idea has come, nothing can stop it." The time for civil rights had come then at that crucial period, and nothing could stop those civil rights bills. They were tinkered with, and they were chipped here and chipped there, but in the main they remained intact.

B: Of course, there was a long filibuster in the Senate.

C: Right.

B: Just a delaying action in your view?

C: Oh, there's no question about it.

B: Of course, in both the House and the Senate, the Republican leadership-- Mr. Halleck and Mr. Dirksen--were supporting the bills too.

C: We had Republican support. Without that Republican support, we would have been lost. You see, the Southern bloc--the Dixiecrats--united with the conservative Republicans, might have been able to defeat those bills. But we always had Republican support there--liberal Republican support.

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B: There was also another piece of legislation in those years in which you were interested-- the Medicare Bill.

C: Yes.

B: I believe you had long before in '60 introduced Medicare legislation. It was held up in the House in '64, wasn't it?

C: Yes.

B: Did Mr. Johnson try hard to get it out in '64?

C: I don't know. Of course, that was not in my committee. [He] wouldn't be likely to confer with me on that. That came out of another committee.

B: And was eventually passed in '65.

C: Yes.

B: Another piece of legislation you had long been interested in passed in '65, too--the liberalization of the Immigration Act--the National Origins Act.

C: Yes.

B: Did Mr. Johnson get directly involved in that?

C: No, he was not directly involved in that. We had spoken about it, and I had told him my plans and what I purported to do. He acquiesced and wished me luck, but I don't think that he took any active part in that particular bill.

There's a long story connected with that immigration legislation. That bill wiped out what is known as the national origins theory of immigration which had the effect of discriminating in favor of one race and preferring another race. That is, it preferred the Nordic and Aryan races against the Slavic and Latin races. I had labored for forty years to get that idea ripped out of the immigration fabric, and I finally succeeded.

The President, naturally, was very, very much interested--interested to such a degree that when the bill was signed he wanted to dramatize the event, and signed the bill at Ellis Island in New York Harbor. At the particular signing, many of the dignitaries of the nation had been invited, and there was a very interesting ceremony at Ellis Island when he signed that particular bill. It was quite an event in my own life, the memory of which I will always cherish. He was very kind on the occasion and made some very laudatory remarks concerning me at that time.

Incidentally, despite what you may hear people say about him, he was a very kindly man innately. There was kindness within him. There was a kernel of kindness within him. Sometimes he might have become angered, and that kindness was hidden. But in general I found him very, very profoundly, not only courteous, but sort of lovable. He's a man you liked to like, you know. I found him that way in all my relations with him. He would go out of his way to say kind words about people. There was never, as far as I know, any bitterness about him. I will always have great admiration for him. All that was exemplified on this particular occasion of immigration which indicated, I suppose, that he was inwardly very much touched by this immigration statute. After all, immigration is a human matter--more human than most of the bills or subject matters over which we have jurisdiction.

B: In those years '64 and '65, Mr. Johnson and the Democratic Congress passed this enormous amount of legislation such as these examples we've been talking about, and then the flood of legislation seemed to dry up. What happened to Congress?

C: I suppose it's like you sit down to a big meal. You just can't take any

more, and the best thing is to digest that.

We're in that period of digestion now. There's practically little of any consequence, legislation-wise, that we're adopting now. I think we're in that period of gestation. We're in that period of trying to enforce what we passed--the wonderful bills that we passed in the Johnson Administration.

I don't think there was ever a President that was more of an activist than Johnson. He got all manner and kinds of legislation. I don't think there was any President that could have driven--I used that word advisedly--driven the Congress as hard as he did, having the objective of getting remedial legislation for the welfare of the nation through than he did. Great credit is due him, and historians will give him that credit.

Of course, he had a lot of tough breaks. He was subject to all kinds of violent but unjustified criticism, most of which was ridiculous and utterly unfounded. He had the Viet Nam situation foisted upon him, and many other of the other matters, not of his own choosing. He had to take the blame for all of that. In that sense, he had a lot of ill luck.

But wipe away that ill luck and wipe away some of these unfortunate matters over which he had no control, you'll find that his record is as good, if not better, than most presidents.

B: Did any Congressmen ever get the idea that they were being driven too hard?

C: Well, it often was said, but I don't think that amounted to anything.

Nobody worked harder, I would say, than the Judiciary Committee. We got an avalanche of bills through--of all sorts--at his behest and suggestions. I never said that we were driven too hard. We welcomed him and his ideas.

Of course, the Republicans may have said that.

- B: Did you participate in the briefings Mr. Johnson held for Congressional leaders on Viet Nam?
- C: Yes. I participated on occasion when he had the leaders there.
- B: Do you believe that Congress was adequately and accurately briefed on the situation there?
- C: As far as I know, they were.
- B: You've worked quite closely, as chairman of the Judiciary Committee, with the Justice Department in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. Do you feel that the Justice Department, in the years of Robert Kennedy and Mr. Katzenbach and Mr. Clark, has been an effective agency in enforcing these laws?
- C: I do.
- B: Were you consulted in Mr. Clark's appointment as Attorney General?
- C: No, I was not; but I had, and still have, a very high regard for Ramsey Clark.
- B: I was going to ask you, sir, because he has received so much public criticism. But you feel that his philosophy as Attorney General is the correct one?
- C: Absolutely correct--no question about it. He'll be vindicated in time. He has been very illy treated by critics.
- B: Another thing that has aroused a good deal of public debate currently is-- put simply as possible--the effectiveness of Congress. Lately, Congress as an institution has been criticized, sometimes rather severely, for being slow, and sometimes being inefficient. Do you feel these criticisms are warranted?
- C: Those criticisms are as old as the hills. You read the newspapers of

1800 or 1820 or 1920 or 1890, and you'll have the same kind of criticism. But Congressmen--like the Rock of Gibraltar--are impervious to those waves of criticism. Congress still stands. And those very critics that are mordant in their assaults on Congress, the minute they get hurt, to whom do they appeal? They appeal to their Congressman or Senator. In other words, that's their refuge for relief constantly and always--those very persons who criticize.

B: You say in your autobiography in connection with events in the '20's that you discovered that the temper of Congress is the temper of the country. Do you believe that's still true?

C: I think that's true.

B: That Congress--

C: Congress mirrors the country. I mean particularly the lower House, which is nearer to the people since its members are elected every two years. They reflect public opinion pretty sharply.

B: In his 1966 State of the Union message, Mr. Johnson proposed a four-year term for Congressmen.

C: I'm opposed to that.

B: Had your committee been consulted about that beforehand?

C: No. Neither I nor my committee, I think, as far as my committee was concerned, were consulted about his recommendation for a four-year term. I'm in disaccord with the President on that score for the very reason that I think that the House registers the will of the people. Two years is a pretty long time, and kaleidoscopic happenings occur even in as short a space as two years. See what has happened in the last two years. So, many, many events have happened. The people must be permitted at least

to register their will on one branch of the government at least once every two years. They shouldn't wait for four years. For that reason I am opposed to the change from two years to four years. It may be convenient for the members, but it isn't the question of convenience to the members. It's the safety and the welfare of the people that should be the primary objective.

B: Did Mr. Johnson press for the legislation to make those terms?

C: No, he did not.

B: Did you make your disapproval of the idea clear to him?

C: I didn't do it directly, but I did it in public print. I'm sure he must have known about it.

B: And, of course, such legislation would have been handled by your committee?

C: Yes.

B: Sir, you've seen a number of Presidents in your long career in Congress. From that perspective, could you evaluate Mr. Johnson as a President?

C: I've served under nine Presidents, and I look upon Johnson as one of the better Presidents under whom I've served.

B: Which one of the other eight does he most closely resemble?

C: I don't want to use the word "resemble." President Johnson had unique qualities of his own. It's difficult to make comparisons. I used the term before--. He was a dynamic President. He was an activist. In that sense he was like Roosevelt. In that sense he was most unlike Calvin Coolidge, for example. He was benign and kindly and affable like Truman.

In a certain sense, Truman and Johnson were not dissimilar. Intuitively and instinctively, they knew what to do which was right. They knew it from their own similar experience rather than from books.

They both were born on the wrong side of the railroad tracks. They knew hardships in their upbringing, and that taught them certain things which you can't get out of books either. They had a feel for the underdog, for the underprivileged. They were both sympathetic. Roosevelt had more-or-less same point of view, but approached it from the other side of the railroad tracks. I'd rather have it approached from the Truman and Johnson side of the railroad tracks because I think there's more sincerity in it.

He wasn't austere and parsimonious like Coolidge or anything like that. He wasn't stiff and a bit pecksniffian like Hoover. Of course, comparing with Eisenhower--Eisenhower was a good general, but he wasn't a good administrator. I don't know how good Johnson would have been as a general. I don't know how good he was as a soldier. He didn't have much experience in that regard, but I think he was a good administrator. He knew how to delegate. Eisenhower delegated too much. Of course, Harding was the first President I served under. Of course, during the period I served under him, he in turn was under a cloud, you know--Daugherty and Albert Fall and a little black bag. But he was a well meaning, good-natured man, but rather careless in his work. He didn't do his work properly, and that's why he got into trouble. I think by-and-large Johnson steered our barque of state in a majestic manner with colors flying, and safely.

B: Does the man have any weaknesses that are discernible to you, sir?

C: He was very proud, proud of certain things. He was a bit easily ruffled when his pride was hurt. I think that was his real weakness. He became irritated once in a while, especially when criticized.

B: Were you ever--?

C: No, not with me. I never found him irritated. He was always, as I indicated at the beginning of the interview, he was always affable and kind to me, and always wanted to be helpful to me, as I wanted to be with him. I have nothing but praise for that man. I just can't find it in me to indicate anything of a dissenting nature. This is a bad way to put it. I can't find anything to dispraise him. I didn't agree with everything he wanted, like, for example, the four-term for a Congressman. But neither I nor he could find anything in our hearts to be harsh to one another. On the contrary, it was to be kind to each other.

B: Were you invited fairly frequently to just social occasions with the Johnsons at the White House?

C: Yes.

B: Some have said that one of the reasons for Mr. Johnson's success is Mrs. Johnson.

C: I think there's something in that. A man of his strength of character needs the softening effect, the love and affection, of a dutiful wife. I was married fifty-two years to that lady over there whose picture you see and I certainly miss her now. Whatever modicum of success I have, some of which I certainly can lay at her door. She assuaged my sorrow when sorrows came. She tempered my anger when anger came forward, and set me right on many, many an occasion. That kind of an overseer, or helpmate--that's a better word--is of overwhelming, staggering, advantage to a man in public life.

B: A fine compliment.

Sir, one really final thing. You've been involved in civil rights

activities through most of your long career, and have been responsible for, as you say, this enormous amount of legislation that has been passed; do you believe that in the long run the problem is on its way to being solved? I was thinking particularly with reference to the cities like New York, where the civil rights difficulties seem to be concentrated now.

C: I'm hopeful that it can be solved. I think it will be solved. I think innately the nation has within itself the seeds of solution, and they will sprout eventually. It's going to take time. There's a revolution that we are now having, particularly resulting from these very decided changes wherein the Negro is now coming into his rights, and as a result of which we have the influx of Southern Negroes in the Northern cities, and the flight of the white to the suburbs, and the overcrowding of our cities by the blacks. All that, I think, is going to create all manner and kinds of difficulties and problems in the foreseeable future. But I am confident that the American mind and the American ingenuity and the American expertise will solve those problems. Any nation that went through the fratricidal civil war and solved that problem certainly can solve this problem.

B: Sir, is there anything else you would like to add to this kind of record?

C: No, I think I've spoken quite a bit.

B: Thank you very much, sir.

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By Emanuel Celler

to the

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